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PROVIDENCE
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1607–1876

NICHOLAS GUYATT

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Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876

Nicholas Guyatt offers a completely new understanding of a central question in American history: How did Americans come to think that God favored the United States above other nations? Tracing the story of American providentialism from the founding of Virginia to the collapse of Reconstruction, this book uncovers the British roots of American religious nationalism before the American Revolution and the extraordinary struggles of white Americans to reconcile their ideas of national mission with the racial diversity of the early republic. Making sense of previously diffuse debates on manifest destiny, millenarianism, and American mission, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876*, explains the origins and development of the idea that God has a special plan for America. This conviction supplied the United States with a powerful sense of national purpose, but it also prevented Americans from clearly understanding events and people that could not easily be fitted into the providential scheme.

Nicholas Guyatt is Assistant Professor of History at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, British Columbia. He has studied at Cambridge University (B.A., M.Phil.) and Princeton University (Ph.D.). This is his first academic monograph, but his fourth book; a work on apocalyptic Christianity will also be published in 2007. He has written about American history for the *London Review of Books* and the *Nation*.

Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876

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I began my Ph.D. at Cambridge, and I was extremely fortunate to work with the late Peter J. Parish. Peter had retired from his position at the University of London, but I was one of many graduate students who came to depend upon him after his move to Cambridge. Without Peter and Jeremy, this book would never have happened, and I would be doing something that I enjoy far less. I wish I had the chance to thank them both in person.

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Introduction

On January 28, 2003, George W. Bush delivered his State of the Union address to Congress at a difficult moment in his presidency. Facing an ailing economy and the prospect of war with Iraq, Bush sought to reassure Americans not only of his political competence but of a higher purpose to the nation's history. "We Americans have faith in ourselves," the president noted at the conclusion of his speech, "but not in ourselves alone. We do not know – we do not claim to know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life and all of history."¹ While the President's religious rhetoric unsettled some observers, his suggestion of a divine role in American policy making is hardly unique.

At first glance, one might see this providential theme as an unbroken thread, reaching back from George W. Bush across the entirety of American history. His references to a divine plan recall the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, Woodrow Wilson, Abraham Lincoln, and a host of other prominent Americans.² Indeed, a founding myth of America holds that the Puritans of New England inaugurated this divine mission, settling with God's approval in a hostile New World and producing a mighty empire from an empty wilderness. From this vantage point, President Bush's references to Providence are merely the most recent public iteration of a very old theme: God was responsible for both the founding of Massachusetts in 1629 and the invasion of Baghdad in 2003. The idea that God has directed the history of the United States has become a commonplace in American life, a way of imagining America's purpose and history

¹ George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," Washington, D.C., January 28, 2003. See also Laurie Goodstein, "A President Puts His Faith in Providence," *New York Times*, February 9, 2003, 4: 4. However, his speechwriter, Michael Gerson, later dismissed the notion that Bush had aligned God with American foreign policy. See Alan Cooperman, "Bush's References to God Defended by Speechwriter," *Washington Post*, December 12, 2004, A6.

² On the death of Ronald Reagan, Bush's vice-president, Dick Cheney, argued that the former president was "more than just an historical figure – he was a providential man." David von Drehle, "A Day of Ritual and Remembrance," *Washington Post*, June 10, 2004, A1.

that seems so thoroughly familiar that one can easily overlook its essential oddness.

This book is an attempt to recover the story of American providentialism and to answer two important questions about providential thinking that seem both obvious and elusive: How did Americans come to think that God had a special plan for their nation? And what did they do with this conviction in the 250 years between the founding of Virginia and the American Civil War? Historians have approached this topic on many occasions in the past, but they have been hampered in a number of ways. One group, exemplified by the great nineteenth-century historian George Bancroft, actually endorsed providentialism as a way of understanding America's development. Although he had trained in Germany and was a strong advocate of a more "scientific" scholarship, Bancroft nonetheless saw God's hand in American history with a kind of relentless assuredness.³ Another group of historians has simply dismissed divine involvement in American history with the same enthusiasm as Bancroft's advocacy, maintaining either that Americans were uncertain about God's intentions or that providentialism had been eclipsed by secularism before the American Revolution.⁴ Finally, historians who have taken providentialism seriously have tended to lose focus by generalizing or domesticating the idea. These scholars have presented the idea of God's involvement as a consistent and largely unchanging force in American history from the colonial period to the present, and they have usually portrayed providential thinking as innately American.⁵

This book takes a different approach. Based on a survey of sermons, histories, printed books, newspapers, magazines, diaries, and other sources from more

³ Peter Novick discusses Bancroft's historical training and sensibility in *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 44–46. Bancroft died in 1891, but a tendency not only to study but also to practice providentialism proved surprisingly durable among American historians in the twentieth century. See, for example, Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (New York: Knopf, 1963). A recent (albeit unusual) call for a return to Bancroft's providentialist historiography is Jonathan Tucker Boyd, "This Holy Hieroglyph: Providence and Historical Consciousness in George Bancroft's Historiography," Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1999.

⁴ See, for example, the debunking studies of an "American mission" in the seventeenth century by Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1988); and Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). On the secularizing thesis, see Gordon S. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 39, no. 3 (July 1982): 401–41.

⁵ See, for instance, Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1935); Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); John F. Berens, *Providence and Patriotism in Early America, 1640–1815* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978); and Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

than two centuries of American history, I argue that providentialism played a leading role in the invention of an American national identity before 1865 and that its role was neither static nor timeless. A diverse group of people used the idea of God's involvement in history to influence some of the most important political debates in antebellum America. In the colonial period, providentialism offered a way to assuage anxieties about the brief past and uncertain present of the English settlements. During the Revolution and the early republic, providential thinking was used to promote the idea of American independence and to debate the place of nonwhite people in the new United States. Although the broad outlines of providentialism endured from the 1600s until the Civil War, the uses of this idea of divine involvement – and the political contexts in which providential arguments were deployed – changed profoundly. We should guard against the easy assumption of an American “mission” or “destiny” that links the seventeenth century to the nineteenth (or even to the present). To assess the true impact of providentialism, we have to recognize that the idea changed over time.

Beyond the core assumption that we should study providentialism historically, this book offers three fresh insights about the idea of divine involvement in American history. First, I reject the idea that providentialism was an American invention. The providential thinking of the colonial period originated in England rather than America, and we can best understand the emergence of American ideas about God's role in history by exploring their English and British analogues. In the seventeenth century, many English observers and politicians – including Oliver Cromwell himself – offered bold analyses of God's role in their national affairs, and a number of them suffered acute anxiety when events seemed to diverge from their predictions. A century later, as they gained an empire and then lost its American annex, Britons struggled to comprehend God's purpose in these events. While historians of Britain and the emerging United States have examined providentialism on each side of the Atlantic, this book offers an extended comparison between American and British providential thinking. This comparison is important not only in demonstrating that there was nothing intrinsically American about the idea of a national destiny but also in explaining why American versions of providential thinking proved particularly durable and influential.

The book's second innovation concerns the kinds of providentialism that prevailed in Britain and America during this period. While we can define providentialism simply as the belief that God intervenes in human history, Americans and Britons developed more specific visions of God's plan for their nations. Some argued that history was cyclical and that nations would rise and fall in God's estimation depending on the worth of their inhabitants at any given moment. Others believed that God had chosen some nations to play a special role in history and that this anointment confirmed benefits and responsibilities that set apart a particular place and people from the rest. Still others sought to map the specific books and predictions of Bible prophecy onto current events, looking to Revelation or Daniel for a primer to contemporary history. All three

of these beliefs were grounded in providentialism, but each constituted a distinct and important variation of the common theme. I argue that these variations are critical to our understanding of how and why providential ideas took such a strong hold in America, and why these ideas continued to appeal to Americans even after their eclipse in Britain.

Finally, I contend that providentialism was not only a component of American identity but also a strategy for achieving concrete political goals. Providential ideas were at work in some of the most important debates in early America, and this book focuses principally on the application of providence to politics. Part One describes how providential thinking came to America, and how the colonists struggled in their early years to understand God's involvement in the turbulent events of seventeenth-century England. By the 1660s American colonists had begun to develop their own understandings of God's purposes in America and to pay less attention to the providential meaning of English history. This exceptionalism was effectively forced upon the colonists by the political and religious confusion in England, but it provided a template for imagining American history as providentially significant and divergent from Britain. During the imperial crisis after 1763, this template was used to structure the colonists' demands and eventually to justify their separatist claims. By the time of the American Revolution, Patriots argued that God had given America a special role in history and that independence had been providentially determined. Although Britons initially dismissed this bold argument, they struggled during the Revolutionary War either to disprove the American conjecture or to sustain a vision of their own national purpose that could transcend it. Patriots continued throughout the war to argue that God had chosen the United States to advance the social and political welfare of the world. This claim, originally a justification for the Revolution, was vindicated and amplified by the Patriot victory.

Part Two explores the process by which this confidence about God's plan for America was undermined in the early republic, as Americans sought to determine the extent of their global influence and the relationship between race and citizenship at home. While Americans squabbled among themselves about the international significance of their political ideas during the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon, they adjusted their providential claims to accommodate their disappointments. They also struggled to make sense of the persistence of nonwhites in America. Did God mean for blacks and Indians to become citizens of the American republic? If not, what was the providential meaning of America's racial diversity? Although many white Americans after 1783 sought to maintain a progressive understanding of American history and purpose – which held that God had placed the United States on an upward trajectory and had shaped its past and future toward the improvement of the world – the extension of slavery and the continuing tensions between whites and Indians confounded this effort. Worse, a loose coalition of providential interpreters – including white abolitionists, opponents of Indian removal, and blacks and Indians themselves – began to circulate a very different understanding of God's will, one that promised national humiliation and

perhaps even national collapse unless nonwhites received justice from the United States.

Southern secession seemed initially to confirm that Americans had forfeited their special mission, but the book's final chapters chronicle the extraordinary retrieval of this destiny during the Civil War itself. While southerners struggled to find a place for the Confederacy in a progressive scheme of history, northerners – led by Abraham Lincoln – suggested that the abolition of slavery might purify the United States and allow the nation to resume its providential course. This argument invited northerners to set aside their long-standing aversion to racial justice in order to preserve another enduring conviction: that God had a special plan for their nation. Unfortunately, the providential bargain that encouraged northerners to accept emancipation helped to deny the rights of blacks thereafter.

The sustained application of providential thinking to the questions of race and slavery in the early republic, like the profusion of ideas about God's direction of the American Revolution, amounts to a case study in the political possibilities of providentialism. The achievement of American independence and the abolition of slavery were radical projects that could be explained and made feasible through assumptions about God's will: facing the might of the British army or their own prejudices toward southern blacks, Americans could feel reassured about revolution or emancipation if they imagined these controversial objectives to be providential milestones on their journey toward the redemption of the world. But the compulsion to imagine American history as inherently progressive and to identify an upward vector in which Plymouth or Jamestown was linked to a vast future for the United States blinded Americans to the missteps and the wrong turns that would punctuate the career of any nation.

Some of the key terms that will be used in this study may be unfamiliar to historians, especially those who work on politics and national identity. "Providentialism" refers to the belief that God controls everything that happens on earth: providential commentators from the early modern period to the nineteenth century liked to quote Christ's words from the Gospel of Matthew that not even the killing of a sparrow could take place without God's knowledge and involvement.⁶ Americans and Britons were, however, keenly aware of a distinction between the ways in which God dealt with individuals, and his treatment of nations: I therefore use the term "personal providentialism" to refer to the former, and "national providentialism" for the latter. One of the fascinating aspects of the history of providentialism concerns the relationship between personal and national providentialism: with an important exception in the aftermath of the English Civil War, many Britons and Americans came to regard personal providentialism as superstitious and backward even as they continued to believe that God directed the fates of nations. Although this book builds

⁶ "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows." Matthew 10:29–31.

upon important studies of personal providentialism in England and America, the following chapters focus overwhelmingly on the national inflection of God's control over history.⁷

Within the framework of national providentialism, I define three broad ideas about God's involvement in history that were commonly invoked between 1607 and 1876. The first version – in which God judged nations solely on the virtues of their people and leaders and then rewarded or punished them without reference to any grand plan for humanity – is described in the following chapters as “judicial providentialism.” The belief that God imagined a special role for certain nations in improving the world and tailored their history to prepare them for the achievement of this mission is referred to as “historical providentialism.” Finally, the belief that God was literally working out the narrative of Revelation in current events and that he had cast various nations in the leading roles of this drama is described as “apocalyptic providentialism.” I say a good deal more about each category in the chapters themselves, but for now it is worth remembering not only that national providentialism was an important subset of the broader view that God controlled everything that happened on earth but also that Americans and Britons could imagine very different fates for themselves even as they accepted God's sovereignty over their history.

In researching this book, I have examined a wide variety of materials that might tell us something about how Britons and Americans imagined the relationship between their nation and God. This has led me to sources that discuss the development and the well-being of a nation, such as histories, newspapers, and political addresses, and sources that search for religious meaning in contemporary events, such as sermons and tracts. Because most can be described as public rhetoric – material written for a general audience and wide consumption rather than for private contemplation – it seems important to acknowledge the questions of audience and intention. What kinds of people wrote and spoke about providentialism in this period, and to whom were their claims addressed? Did these people actually believe what they were saying about God's role in history, or did they use providential language strategically to achieve a desired political or social end?

The first question is more straightforward than the second. The voices in the first half of this book are primarily privileged, literate, white, and male: preachers, politicians, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals who dominated the intellectual and political life of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Yet the recurrence of providential thinking in sermons, political speeches and public festivals suggests that the broader population in both Britain and America was keenly attuned to a religious understanding of national history. In the political and religious rhetoric of Britain and America, providentialism was

⁷ The key works on personal providentialism in early modern England and America are Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Michael Winship, *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

used to persuade ordinary people of the importance and rewards of a national political project.⁸

In the second half of the book, which focuses on the battles between Americans over the racial composition of the new United States, we can see evidence of a broad popular understanding of national providentialism both in the mass media of the early nineteenth century and in the willingness of those on the margins of American society to appropriate providential ideas. Blacks and Indians, in addition to white abolitionists and opponents of removal, based political appeals on the notion that God would revoke America's auspicious destiny if its leaders persisted in enslaving and expelling nonwhite people. While providential thinking continued to appeal to many religious and political elites, it was also directed at and appropriated by a diverse group of Americans who hoped to yoke their particular concerns to the fate of the entire nation. I conclude that providential thinking had considerable purchase among ordinary Americans and Britons as well as among elites.

This raises the question of intention, about which it is harder to generalize. Did everyone who employed the idea of divine involvement between 1607 and 1876 actually believe that God controlled national politics and world events? And that they might offer prescriptions for political action that would cohere with God's plan? This question is scarcely easier to answer even if we limit our focus to a single figure like Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell seems fervently to have believed that he was doing God's work in opposing Charles I and establishing the Commonwealth, and by 1649 – with the execution of the king and the triumph of Parliament – it appeared that God had rewarded Cromwell's efforts. By 1655, however, his providential arc had reached its zenith. Possessed of the idea that God intended England to challenge the Catholic empire in America, Cromwell launched a disastrous expedition to capture the Spanish island of Hispaniola. Upon the failure of his plan, he fell into a kind of providential paralysis, unable either to divine God's will or to muster sufficient confidence in his own actions to proceed in his course as God's instrument in England.⁹

Or we might study Thomas Paine, whose rejection of Christianity and other forms of revealed religion made him perhaps the most notorious writer in the Atlantic world at the opening of the nineteenth century. Paine's *Age of Reason*, conceived in captivity during the darkest days of the French Revolution, was intended to demolish Christianity. Paine spoke in his conclusion of taking an ax to the Bible, of leveling the forest of beliefs in which so many people had been lost for centuries. Earlier in his career as a Revolutionary propagandist, however, Paine had argued repeatedly both that God intended the United States to be independent and that America would play a special role in God's plan for the world. Had Paine changed his mind in the intervening years, or was

⁸ On the relationship between public festival and nationalist sentiment, see David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989).

⁹ See Chapter 1.

he merely a rhetorical opportunist? As he prepared his pamphlets *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis* for a wavering audience of would-be Patriots, did he employ the language of divine involvement with his tongue firmly in his cheek?¹⁰

Providentialism could be ideological or rhetorical – or both – depending upon the convictions of a particular person, or the political exigencies of a particular moment. In this book, I have approached providential claims as *arguments*: efforts to explain God’s purpose in the world that were harnessed to political goals in the present. This book is neither a religious history in the strict sense nor an analysis of some “American Mind” or collective consciousness for which providentialism was a universal grammar. Instead, I have focused on the application of providential thinking to politics and on the effects of providential claims upon some of the most important debates in early American history. It may be tempting to dismiss providentialism as simply a rhetorical device, a religious disguise that masked the true intentions and motives of brave revolutionaries, ambitious politicians, or committed racists. But the sheer profusion of providential language in early America demonstrates a broad public audience for these ideas. In many cases, we can be confident that a particular person who used providential ideas was a committed believer in God’s control over history. Even those whose public piety diverged from their private convictions – like Thomas Paine – adopted providential language precisely because they realized that many Americans accepted its premises. Yet, while providentialism might serve to embellish political debates, it could also shape them in ways that its promoters did not anticipate. In some cases, those who discerned God’s purpose in a particular debate or event would eventually rue their assertion.

This book describes how many Americans came to argue that their history and their nation were uniquely favored by God and shaped for the political and moral redemption of the world. These ideas were the building blocks of the nationalism that inspired the United States during the War of Independence; but they were obstacles to the resolution of the problems of racial diversity that confronted the new nation after 1783. (They also complicated the efforts of Americans to integrate themselves into a world that did not always share their redemptive optimism.) The idea of an American mission in the early republic was extremely powerful because it was based on an understanding of what God wanted the United States to do as well as on a progressive reading of American history that acted as a guarantor of God’s intentions. But missionary assumptions depended on a willingness to tidy up the past to preserve the nation’s upward trajectory and to elide or ignore those darker moments that might otherwise have been instructive. Providentialism in America offered its users enormous power to shape the future at the expense of a full accounting of the past. The benefits and the costs of this bargain deserve careful consideration.

¹⁰ See Chapters 2 and 3.

PART ONE

BRITAIN, AMERICA, AND THE EMERGENCE
OF PROVIDENTIAL SEPARATISM

Providence and the Problem of England in Early America

In March 1640 John Winthrop took up his pen to write an angry letter. There were many reasons for the governor of the fledgling Massachusetts Bay plantation to be aggrieved. After ten years of constant growth, the colony was not only drawing fewer emigrants but even losing some of its prominent inhabitants to England. Winthrop's ire, however, was directed at a specific and, at first glance, unlikely target: William Fiennes, Lord Saye and Seale, one of the strongest supporters of the Puritan colonies in England. Although Fiennes was not in complete agreement with the Massachusetts settlers' religious and political decisions – he would have preferred a more aristocratic form of government, for one thing – he was a resolute defender of the Puritan settlements at a moment when King Charles I and the Anglican Church were suspicious of religious dissent in America. Fiennes had even used Winthrop's famous words – that New England was “a city upon a hill” – in a letter to an American correspondent, suggesting that he appreciated not only the political but the religious importance of the Massachusetts experiment.¹

In 1640, however, Winthrop discovered that Fiennes had thrown his support behind another colonizing effort. While the English settlements in New England and Virginia had achieved a modest degree of success by this date, they had hardly established themselves as the leading colonies on the vast American continent. Fiennes and a number of other Puritan sympathizers in England, disappointed both by Massachusetts's rigidly Congregational government and by reports of religious intolerance, simply decided to look for another location in which to plant a new settlement. They chose Providence Island, a small outcrop near the coast of Nicaragua, which promised a more salubrious climate

¹ William Fiennes to John Cotton, July 1638, in Sargent Bush Jr., ed., *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2001), 283. Fiennes's proposals for a hierarchical New England are reprinted in *ibid.*, 519–23.

than New England and a beachhead into the vast, weakly defended territory of Spanish America. While Fiennes continued to write supportive letters to his friends in New England, he threw his weight behind this rival Puritan settlement. Moreover, he did little to check the many rumors in London and elsewhere that New England, and Massachusetts in particular, was on the wane.²

Winthrop's original letter is lost, but Fiennes's long reply summarized the first message and preserved the governor's chagrin. According to Winthrop, Fiennes was guilty of "bringing up an ill report uppon your [Winthrop's] land, and diverting mens intentions from cominge to you." For this, Fiennes could "expect and fear judgements" from God, because God himself had given Massachusetts its mandate and had underwritten its progress. Winthrop was adamant that God wanted English Puritans to come to New England rather than Providence Island; if Fiennes continued to undermine Massachusetts, God might hold him personally responsible for upsetting the divine plan. Fiennes's response was as passionate as Winthrop's original. While he conceded that the governor and his fellow settlers had founded "glorious churches" in America, he angrily rejected the suggestion that there was a direct parallel between the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan and the Puritan migration to New England: "I pray consider seriously," he warned, "and lett our frendes thear be judges betweene us, wheather this be not a taking of Godes name in vayne, to misaply scriptures in this manner." Fiennes's skepticism about God's intentions for Massachusetts was bolstered by the recent outflow of colonists, which comprised not only migrants returning to England but also settlers in search of another American plantation that might enjoy greater success. Archly referring to "them whoe dayly leave you att the Bay," Fiennes suggested that Winthrop leave Providence Island alone and instead ask his own departing neighbors "wheather they dowbt the worke be of God?"³

Fiennes pressed home his point in a way that infuriated Winthrop. Perhaps, Fiennes continued, God had intended New England not as a permanent resting place for the Puritan migrants but, instead, as a place where the godly could "be increased and fitted for the worke intended for you": the colonization not of Massachusetts but of Providence Island. Worse, if people like Winthrop refused to recognize this rival interpretation of God's will, they would "doe noe other than cast your selfe downe from the pynacle, and refuse the stayres wch are before you." There was a note of triumph in Fiennes's peroration, as if Winthrop's rival booster had won this argument and had exposed the flaws in Winthrop's thinking:

Thus may I argue with as much probabylytie as you; for it is as likely that you have in providence bin cast uppon that place, to remove from thence uppon due occasion, as to stay thear, and much more likely, when in some other you may doe more service, and receave more meanes by much of comfortable subsistence. Hear you see wch way

² On Providence Island, see Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Providence Island, 1630–1641: The Other Puritan Colony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

³ William Fiennes to John Winthrop, July 9, 1640, in Robert C. Winthrop, *The Life and Letters of John Winthrop*, 2 vols. (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1867), 2: 422–26.

all your arguments may be turned, with as much convincing evydenge, as to conclude that you bringe them for.⁴

Fiennes appeared to be winning the battle in 1640. Providence Island was bolstered by new settlers, who successfully repelled a Spanish attack and drew more migrants from New England. Winthrop urged the General Court to dissuade colonists from making the trip, arguing of Massachusetts that “God had chosen this country to plant his people in” and that any defectors from the colony would incur divine retribution. For some observers in both England and Massachusetts, however, there was nothing special about New England and, in spite of Winthrop’s protestations, there was no reason to imagine a divine mission for one colony that might not also – or better – be undertaken in another.⁵

Providence Island has received little attention from those who have discussed the existence or nature of an American mission or “errand” in the seventeenth century.⁶ Perhaps this is partly because, as Winthrop gleefully told his diary, “the Lord showed his displeasure” against those who had favored the southern plantation over New England. In 1641 Spain seized the island and expelled its settlers. As if to make the divine dispensation still clearer, the mastermind of the effort to transport disaffected colonists from Massachusetts to Providence Island, John Humfrey, was the victim of a massive fire in the winter of 1640 that destroyed his corn and hay and forced him to seek the charity of the General Court. (A vindicated Winthrop rewarded Humfrey’s desperate appeal with munificence.)⁷ But the story of this rival effort gives us an idea of the many meanings of America in the seventeenth-century English world and invites a fresh analysis of the purpose and identity of the early American colonies.

We can draw four useful conclusions from Winthrop’s altercation with Fiennes. First, Massachusetts Bay, and even New England more generally, was merely one of a number of English settlements and colonial projects in America, most of which were underpinned by some form of religious justification. Second, the religious meaning of these settlements was frequently bound up with an understanding of English history and politics. Third, there was substantial debate and disagreement over the purpose of settlements, and especially over God’s role in the colonizing enterprise. Fourth, the meaning of a particular colony was liable to change over time and was hardly immune to the vicissitudes of internal or external events. New England might have seemed like a crucial refuge for the godly in 1630, when Charles I and Bishop William Laud

⁴ Ibid., 425.

⁵ Richard S. Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yeandle, eds., *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630–1649* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 324.

⁶ The exception is Karen Ordahl Kupperman, “Errand to the Indies: Puritan Colonization from Providence Island through the Western Design,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 45, no. 1 (1988): 70–99. Kupperman engages the literature on the idea of a Puritan “mission,” but her essay attempts not to problematize this concept but instead to add the Caribbean as another option for Puritan settlement and thus to refigure the Puritan choice as “trilateral.”

⁷ Dunn et al., eds., 333.

embarked on a new wave of religious repression. But just a few years later, as a resurgent English Parliament moved against Charles and the bishops, America seemed so peripheral to God's plan that many colonists sailed home.

This chapter describes how people in England and America thought about God's intentions during the particularly turbulent years of the seventeenth century. While religious groups and commercial entrepreneurs founded the first English colonies in the New World, England's political system was smashed to pieces in the 1640s, remade in the 1660s, then threatened again in the 1680s. All the while, commentators in England and America argued that these events must conform to a divine plan, but they labored to discover its outlines or to anticipate the direction in which it was headed.

I. "Openinge a Dore": 1600–1640

Prophecy, History, and National Providentialism

To understand the origins and development of national providentialism, we have to acknowledge two basic presumptions that enjoyed wide currency in Europe from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century: first, that God controlled everything that happened on earth; second, that God had a particular plan for human history. From the first presumption, one might interpret anything that happened in one's life, good or bad, as evidence of God's involvement. Events that seemed particularly random or sudden – like an illness, a shipwreck, or a storm – could be treated as evidence of God's judgment of a particular individual or community. This personal form of providentialism may have emerged from non-Christian beliefs in the early modern period; certainly, there was significant overlap between a prodigy or wonder that was attributed to devils, witches, or other occult forces and an unexpected event that was attributed to God. The impulse to interpret the unexpected from a Christian perspective was in many respects more restrained than its non-Christian antecedents. While God might be working out his will in these ways, it was not always possible for humans to gain a complete sense of the divine purpose in an event. Bad things sometimes happened to good people, and the wicked often prospered; only by considering the unknowable fact of someone's heavenly reward (or lack thereof) could providential justice be seen entire. Personal providentialism thus enabled Christians in early modern Europe and seventeenth-century America to read God's will into the events of their lives, but it also discouraged them from believing that they could interpret providence with perfect clarity.⁸

⁸ Useful accounts of providentialism in this period are offered by Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Michael P. Winship, *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Blair Worden, "Providence and Politics in Cromwellian England," *Past and Present* 109 (1985): 55–99; and Barbara Donagan, "Godly Choice: Puritan Decision-Making in Seventeenth-Century England," *Harvard Theological Review* 76, no. 3 (1983): 307–34.

The second presumption, that God was working out a plan in human history, was rather different. The Bible offered an account of the trials of the Israelites and the story of Christ's sacrifice, but it also contained a number of books of prophecy. The narratives of the Old and New Testament composed only part of God's plan for humanity, and the prophetic books discussed events that would come to pass as surely as the historical sections had already done. The Antichrist would take over the world, Christ would appear in person to vanquish his rule, and God would build a heavenly kingdom on earth. (There was considerable debate about the timing and sequence of these events.) Beyond the judgments that God might work in the lives of individuals or communities, the events of contemporary history might yield clues as to the status of this prophetic scheme for the salvation of the entire world. Early modern Christians believed that they were living between biblical events that had already occurred and those which were promised by prophecy. If the promise of living in such a time was that Christ would eventually return to redeem every Christian, the burden was that believers had to watch for the signs that would indicate that the end times were at hand.⁹

Christians had lived with an awareness of the inevitability of Christ's return since at least the end of the first century CE, when John wrote the book of Revelation and a wave of Roman repression threatened the nascent church. Moreover, there had been numerous attempts to date the end times in the centuries before 1500, each of them overtaken by historical events that would not comply with these predictions. (Some church fathers, including Augustine, tried to dampen popular enthusiasm for a literal understanding of prophecy.) The Protestant Reformation generated a fresh sense of expectation that God's eschatological scheme – his plan for human salvation – had reached its final stages. The fracturing of the Christian Church into Catholic and Protestant wings created a clear candidate for the role of the Antichrist: the pope, whose abuse of religious authority had inspired the Reformation in the first place. As wars of religion raged across Europe in the sixteenth century, the connection between Catholicism and prophetic Scripture became a commonplace. Although it was hard to be sure of the exact chronology of either the biblical prophecies or their contemporary implementation in European history, Protestants were encouraged not only to see the Bible come alive in the political and military conflicts of their era but to recognize their own responsibility to bring about the culmination of the prophecies: the defeat of Catholicism and the establishment of an earthly kingdom of God.¹⁰

⁹ On the origins of eschatology and millennialism, see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); and John J. Collins, Bernard McGinn, and Stephen J. Stein, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, 3 vols. (New York: Continuum, 1998).

¹⁰ See, for instance, Richard K. Emerson and Bernard McGinn, eds., *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); and Andrew

Between these two understandings of God's role in the world – the belief that he meted out justice in the lives of individuals and that he was choreographing a grander drama through the events of prophecy – lay national providentialism. Several understandings of God's relationship with a nation were possible, from more minimal definitions of divine justice to complex amalgamations of contemporary history and biblical prophecy. Nations might, like individuals, receive reward or punishment from God depending on the piety of their people, the justice of their conduct toward other nations, and so on. A particular nation might, like the Jewish people in the Old Testament, enjoy a long relationship with God and receive favors that marked it out from other nations. More grandiosely, a nation might have a special role to play in the fulfillment of the apocalyptic narrative, either by striking a particularly powerful blow against Satan or by providing the location for Christ to found his earthly kingdom. Because the prophecies were both vague and written with no knowledge of Europe's post-Reformation political system, the problems and possibilities of politically motivated interpretations were enormous.

One final wrinkle of national providentialism involved the definition of a nation. The modern understanding of a nation as coterminous with a particular set of borders, and enjoying a particular form of sovereignty, took shape only after the middle of the seventeenth century and was hardly definitive even a century later. Christians who looked back at the Israelites of the Old Testament could recognize a nation as signifying not a particular ethnic group or geographical area but a shared sense of religious observance. The Reformation in Europe may have reinforced this religious definition of a nation, because international Protestantism was, unlike Catholicism, arranged in a series of national churches. Although the grand religious conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism had an enormous influence over European politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these competing understandings of nation – a particular church versus an ethnic group or a geographical area – also complicated interpretations of God's will.¹¹

Most ordinary Protestants had little cause to ponder the vagaries of prophetic promises and international politics as they lived their daily lives. Historians of early modern England have recovered a rich understanding of personal providentialism – encompassing unexplained fires, sudden outbreaks of disease, monstrous births, and other extraordinary phenomena – but have detected few

Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). A useful account of seventeenth-century millennial thinking, including interpretations involving the geography or settlers of America, is offered by James West Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought: The Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 37–80.

¹¹ On the ambiguous definition of nation, and the uncertainty over the extent and representative potential of a "godly remnant," see Peter Lake, "Presbyterianism, the Idea of a National Church, and the Argument from Divine Right," in Lake and Maria Dowling, eds., *Protestantism and the National Church in Sixteenth Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 193–224.

signs of an active national providentialism in the lives of most people.¹² However, sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English commentators frequently employed national providentialism to make sense of international affairs, especially as they involved England itself. The unexpected defeat of the Spanish Armada of 1588 was hailed as evidence of God's support for England and for Protestantism; the corresponding discovery of the gunpowder plot against King James I in 1605 also appeared to confirm that God was on England's side. These deliverances were celebrated throughout England, and while some people speculated that God had a particular regard for his English church, the international dimensions of the struggle against Catholicism probably kept this exceptionalist tendency in check. Although England might have received some spectacular favors from God, it was just one of a number of Protestant nations working toward the accomplishment of his greater designs.¹³

As English merchants contemplated the establishment of colonies in America at the beginning of the seventeenth century, national providentialism in England oscillated between a modest and an extravagant reading of God's role in contemporary history. The victory over the Spanish Armada, for example, might simply indicate that God had rewarded England for the piety of its people or the statecraft of its leaders. Viewed from the perspective of biblical prophecies, on the other hand, the defeat of the Spanish fleet suggested an important advance in the crusade against the Antichrist. The more modest version offered an understanding of God's involvement that was purely judicial: a nation would receive rewards or punishment depending on its immediate conduct and deserts. The extravagant version suggested a special role for the nation in the prophetic drama outlined in the Bible, and might imply a national responsibility to continue in the present course until Christ had triumphed over the Antichrist and returned to found his earthly kingdom. These different interpretations – judicial and apocalyptic – each affirmed the core presumption of national providentialism: that everything that took place was divinely controlled, and that one should not attempt to understand the world without recognizing God's superintending role. However, the difference between reactive and proactive understandings of providence – between, say, giving thanks to God for the victory over the Spanish Armada and imagining that God intended England to drive Spain from America – was of crucial importance to the application of providentialism in national politics.¹⁴

¹² On the primacy of local identities in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, see Anthony Fletcher, "The First Century of English Protestantism and the Growth of National Identity," in Stuart Mews, ed., *Religion and National Identity*, Studies in Church History 20 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 309–17, at 317.

¹³ On the international focus of English Protestants, see Patrick Collinson, "England and International Calvinism, 1558–1640," in Menna Prestwich, ed., *International Calvinism, 1541–1715* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 196–223.

¹⁴ For the argument that English writers imagined their nation to be set apart from Europe and specially chosen by God, see William Haller, *The Elect Nation: The Meaning and Relevance of Foxe's*

Virginia: "Weake and Feeble Crutches"

The first enduring English colony in North America was founded in Virginia in 1607, and the providential assumptions just described underpinned the efforts of the colony's boosters to attract investors and settlers to the ambitious enterprise. Historians have usually focused on Massachusetts rather than Virginia in discussing the origins of providential thinking in English America, given Virginia's predominantly commercial aspect and its almost complete dependence on London for political and administrative direction. This focus on New England is logical but misleading. While Virginians were less inclined to speculate on the higher purpose of their residency in America, the rhetoric surrounding the establishment of the colony confirms both the English origins of national providentialism and the application of providential concepts to multiple settlements on the American continent. There was nothing inherently separatist or innately "American" about providential thinking. Virginia also demonstrated that the interpretive challenges that faced the Massachusetts settlers – Why should they move to America? What was the meaning of their settlement project? How should they treat Native Americans? – were familiar to English colonists more than a decade before the arrival of William Bradford and the *Mayflower* in 1620.¹⁵

For much of the sixteenth century, English observers had looked on helplessly as Spain, England's great rival, had conquered the American continent. Although Spain was not the only European power to establish settlements and trading posts in America, the Spanish conquests were by far the most extensive and lucrative. In addition to the fleets of gold and silver that brought riches from the mines at Zacatecas and Potosí, Spain took pride in its apparent conversion of the native population. Boasting material and spiritual success from its new empire, Spain presented powerful evidence to England that God favored the Catholic Church. Moreover, at least some English commentators – Richard

Book of Martyrs (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); and David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989). Dissenting interpretations which downplay either the extent of an English distinctiveness or the optimism that English commentators may have derived from this understanding of providence include Katherine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain, 1530–1645* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Richard Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse* (Oxford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1978); Patrick Collinson, "Biblical Rhetoric: The English Nation and National Sentiment in the Prophetic Mode," in Claire McEachern and Debora Shuger, eds., *Religion and Culture in Renaissance England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15–45; Michael McGiffert, "God's Controversy with Jacobean England," *American Historical Review* 88, no. 5 (1983): 1151–74; and Walsham, 287–90. I argue in this chapter that a variety of providential interpretations of England's identity are possible and that no single definition of God's purpose for the nation prevailed in this period. For a judicious and balanced assessment of the question of England as an "elect nation," see Patrick Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1988), 1–27.

¹⁵ For an overview of the founding of Virginia, see Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 44–107.

Hakluyt among them – admitted the possibility that God had “reserved” America for Spain rather than England.¹⁶ The prevailing tension and rivalry between England and Spain, however, hardly encouraged English commentators to follow Hakluyt’s example. The widespread English impression that Spain’s interest in America was material rather than spiritual – combined with reports from dissident Spaniards of cruelties toward the Indians – provided the basis for an English critique of Spain and for a withholding of any providential imprimatur for Spanish America.¹⁷

The early rhetoric promoting English settlement in Virginia combined an emphasis on America’s promise with an acknowledgment of England’s domestic problems.¹⁸ From 1608, merchants and ministers, often at the behest of the for-profit Virginia Company that had obtained the royal concession to found a new colony, gave lectures and preached sermons in London in search of investors and emigrants for the enterprise. These boosters of Virginia frequently concentrated on the economic and social problems of England as well as the possibilities of America. Company chaplain Robert Gray remarked in 1609 that the English “are growne to be a great people, so that one lot is not enough for

¹⁶ David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 79–80. Armitage suggests that Hakluyt was a more influential theorist of empire in seventeenth-century England than his providentialist contemporary Samuel Purchas, and he produces Hakluyt’s astonishing remark on God’s treatment of Spain to reinforce this argument. While Armitage’s assertion is important, it should be noted that very few other English promoters of American colonization appear to have endorsed Hakluyt’s view of Spain as providentially favored; many proponents of English settlement in New England and Virginia specifically cited Spain’s foothold in the continent as a divine imperative for a rival process of colonization.

¹⁷ On the relationship between Spanish success in the Americas and early English colonization, see Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, c. 1500–c. 1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); J. H. Elliott, “Empire and State in British and Spanish America,” in Serge Gruzinski and Nathan Wachtel, eds., *Le Nouveau Monde, Mondes Nouveaux: L’expérience américaine* (Paris: Éditions de l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1996), 365–82; and Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). Bartolomé de las Casas, the Dominican friar who proved to be Spain’s most enduring critic of Indian abuse, was made available to English readers in a translation of 1583: *The Spanish Colonie; or, Briefe Chronicle of the Actes and gestes of the Spaniardes in the West Indies, called the newe World* (London: William Brome, 1583).

¹⁸ Andrew Fitzmaurice offers an account of the sermons that accompanied the short life of the Virginia Company (1606–24) in “Every man, that prints, adventures’: The Rhetoric of the Virginia Company Sermons,” in Lori Anne Ferrell and Peter McCullough, eds., *The English Sermon Revised: Religion, Literature and History, 1600–1750* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 24–42. Fitzmaurice’s focus, however, is more on the classical antecedents of this promotional literature than on its providentialist dimensions, a theme that he also explores in his “Classical Rhetoric and the Promotion of the New World,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 2 (1997): 221–43. Although Fitzmaurice and David Armitage (*Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, 92–94) have rescued the company sermons from scholarly obscurity, both authors downplay their providentialist aspect.

us.”¹⁹ His complaint was echoed in a Virginia Company promotional pamphlet of 1610 that pointed to the “inundation of people” in England who “doth overflow this little Iland”; and the pamphlet suggested that thousands, perhaps “millions” of these people would ultimately be settled in America, thus averting the harsh policies that would be necessary to control a crowded population in England.²⁰ Some supporters of Virginia (and of commercial settlements elsewhere in America) pointed to different motives for undertaking the enterprise: John Smith, perhaps the most famous early advocate of English settlements in the New World, suggested in 1616 that exploration and adventure needed no further justification: “What so truley sutes with honour and honestie, as the discovering things unknowne?”²¹ Company official Robert Johnson, in one of the earliest pamphlets on Virginia, recalled the “Noble deeds” of Alexander the Great and Hercules and suggested that English colonization would “farre excell” these vaunted precedents.²² John Smith, though, was skeptical over whether romantic or religious motives would sustain a colony: “I am not so simple,” he declared in 1616, “to thinke, that ever any other motive than wealth, will ever erect there a Commonweale.”²³ Unless the audience of merchants and prospective emigrants could be guaranteed a profit, there was little hope of success.

Thus the boosters of the first English settlements had an awkward task: they had to distinguish the English colonial impulse from that of Spain, cast by John Smith and others as merely self-gain, and yet also to harness precisely the same material interest on the part of investors and settlers. One indirect means of doing this was to focus upon the Indians. Smith’s first account of Virginia in 1608 placed Indian conversion in the foreground, arguing that England would win “everlasting renowne” if it succeeded in “the erecting of true religion among Infidells.”²⁴ This theme resounded throughout the Virginia Company’s rhetoric, which argued for the positive value of Protestant evangelism in America and dismissed the cynical idea that Indians would experience the same cruel treatment from Protestants as they had already received from Catholic Spain. “Must we bait them with dogges,” asked Puritan minister William Symonds, “that shall eate up the mothers with their children? Let such be the practises of the divell, . . . of Antichrist and his frie[r], that is of purple Rome.” A focus on Indian conversion might both differentiate the Virginia colony from Spain and provide

¹⁹ Robert Gray, *A Good Speed to Virginia* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1609), n.p. [13].

²⁰ *A True Declaration of the estate of the Colonie in Virginia, With a confutation of such scandalous reports as haue tended to the disgrace of so worthy an enterprise* (London: William Barret, 1610), 61–62.

²¹ John Smith, *A Description of New England* (1616), in Philip L. Barbour, ed., *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith*, 3 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1986), 1: 343.

²² Robert Johnson, *Nova Britannia: Offering Most Excellent Fruites by Planting in Virginia* (London: Samuel Macham, 1609), n.p. [35].

²³ Smith, *Description of New England*, 1: 346.

²⁴ John Smith, *A True Relation of such occurrences and accidents of noate as hath hapned in Virginia since the first planting of that Collony* (1608), in Barbour, ed., 1: 25.

some armament against domestic critics who questioned the colony's motives or its effects on the natives.²⁵

The culmination of this rhetoric was Robert Johnson's *The New Life of Virginea* (1612), a sequel to his earlier tract. Johnson built on the argument that England would approach Indians from a very different perspective than Spain, providing an eschatological framework to clarify the superiority of the English mission. According to Johnson, the Indians were God's "speciall members," who had been punished by the Spaniards but who now stood ready to receive the true Gospel. God had "raised up" the Virgin Queen and precipitated her interest in American settlement, resulting eventually in the eponymous colony. If the prospective migrants were asked for their "provocations," they could answer confidently: "What can bee greater than from the higher? from God that hath given us the light of his word, that wee might enlighten this blind people."²⁶ Other Virginia boosters shied from such an explicit providential role for England but shared Johnson's interest in the eschatological dimensions of Indian conversion. William Symonds noted the prophetic requirement that the Gospel be spread across the globe before Christ's return. Although he was prepared for objections to this speculation – "[I] seeme to encline to the Millenaries, or such as looke for the gospell to be spread over all the world" – he stood his ground in arguing that the transportation of Protestantism into Spanish America might have an important providential meaning.²⁷

Virginia's first two decades were not without incident, and boosters of the colony in London were quick to seize on any success to argue for God's involvement. The fabled expedition of 1609 – in which Sir Thomas Gates and his men were initially shipwrecked on the unknown island of Bermuda, before escaping on makeshift boats and reaching Jamestown just in time to save the colony from collapse – offered irrefutable evidence that, in the words of one London minister, "God himselfe is the founder and favourere of this Plantation."²⁸ But while this rhetoric was undoubtedly central to the efforts to promote Virginia in England and to attract investors and migrants, the providential boosters were dogged by the need both to address the material interests of their audience and to acknowledge the many problems experienced by the fledgling plantation.

²⁵ See, for example, Gray, n.p. [18], and William Symonds, *Virginia: A Sermon Preached at White-Chapel Inn, in the Presence of many, Honourable and Worshipfull, the Adventurers and Planters for Virginia* (London: I. Windet, 1609), 14.

²⁶ Robert Johnson, *The New Life of Virginea: Declaring the Former Successe and Present Estate of that Plantation, being the second part of Nova Britannia* (London: Felix Kyngston for William Welby, 1612), n.p. [9–10, 49].

²⁷ Symonds, 47.

²⁸ William Crashaw, "Epistle Dedicatorie," in Alexander Whitaker, *Good Newes from Virginia, Sent to the Counsell and Company of Virginia, Resident in England* (London: Felix Kyngston for William Welby, 1613), [viii]. For other accounts of the providential significance of Gates's expedition, see *True Declaration*, 48; [Silvester Jourdain], *A Plaine Description of the Barmudas, Now Called Sommer Ilands, With the manner of their discoverie Anno 1609 by the shipwrack and admirable deliuerance of Sir Thomas Gates, and Sir George Sommers* (London: W. Stansby for W. Welby, 1613), [iii–iv]; and Whitaker, 22.

The promoters of Virginia produced jumbled arguments in an effort to satisfy different audiences. One suggested in 1609 that “many actions both good in themselves, and in their successe, have been performed with bad intents.” The colonists might advance the kingdom of God “however our naughtiness of mind may sway very much.” Another acknowledged the greed of English merchants but derived from it a novel interpretation of the enterprise: if “so many Honorable and worthy persons” had been persuaded “to disburse so freely and so willingly, such fair summes of money,” this must demonstrate divine involvement. Puritan minister Alexander Whitaker even suggested that merchants should commit their funds in the understanding that providence would eventually reward their efforts. God had demonstrated by the sacrifice of his son that he would redeem his debts, and merchants should be happy to consider Christ as collateral against their investments in Virginia.²⁹

Many of these sermons bear witness to the tortuous effort both to promote the Virginia colony as profitable and to deny that profit was the rationale for supporting it. Robert Johnson, even in his early 1609 sermon, balanced the injunction that “we are to looke for no gaine in lewe of all our adventures” with an important qualification: “undoubtedly there is assured hope of gaine, . . . but looke it bee not chiefe in our thoughtes.”³⁰ The other problem facing the supporters of colonization in Virginia was that the colony experienced at least as many setbacks as successes. The sailors who ferried supplies between London and Jamestown told of political intrigue, disputes with the Indians, and a neglect of religion. The Virginia Company had difficulty persuading people of means to make the journey to its colony and then struggled to control reports of unruly or un-Christian behavior on the part of those migrants who were prepared to make the trip. Although the company itself admitted in a 1620 pamphlet that “many disasters” had overtaken the settlement, it argued that God had now decided “to blesse and prosper our late carefull endeavours” and to correct “the present defects, wherewith the Colony was kept downe.”³¹ By the spring of 1622, the colony had indeed turned a corner, or so it seemed. Patrick Copland, another London preacher, offered a Thanksgiving sermon before an audience of relieved company managers and investors. Noting that many of them had wished in recent years “that you had never put your hand to this Plough,” he happily observed that the tide had turned: “And now, Beloved, is not the case altered?” Recalling an early episode in the colony’s history, in which a vessel bound for Virginia had escaped from the clutches of a Turkish ship, Copland affirmed the certainty of God’s involvement: “Was not here the presence of God printed, as it were, in *Folio* on Royall Crowne Paper and Capitall Letters?”³²

²⁹ Johnson, *Nova Britannia*, n.p. [15]; Whitaker, n.p. [xiv], [xix], 34.

³⁰ Johnson, *Nova Britannia*, n.p. [15].

³¹ *A Declaration of the State of the Colonie and Affaires in Virginia* (London: T.S., 1620), 1.

³² Patrick Copland, *Virginia’s God be Thanked; or, A Sermon of Thanksgiving for the Happie successe of the affayres in Virginia this last yeare* (London: J.D. for William Sheppard and John Bellamie, 1622), 11, 20. On some of the difficulties in the colony’s early years, see T. H. Breen,

Unbeknownst to Copland and his audience, however, the colony had just suffered its worst setback so far. More than three hundred colonists were killed in an Indian attack on March 22, a testament both to the poor relations between the English and Native Americans and to the slipshod organization of the colony's defenses. Once again, the efforts of the company and its supporters appeared to be in ruins. It was left to the poet John Donne, now serving as the dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, to make sense of the disaster for the company's investors in a sermon of November 1622. Donne chose perhaps the only line of argument available to him: the colony's backers were wrong to expect quick returns from their endeavors. Using a metaphor that recalled the colorful reputation of his youth, Donne insisted that "you cannot beget a Sonne, and tell the Mother, I will have this Sonne borne within five Moneths." God himself had chosen to populate the world not by "creating men of clay, as fast as they made Bricks of Clay in *Egypt*," but by entrusting the task to a single couple, Adam and Eve. Even here, however, Donne struggled to reconcile the urge for material reward with the need to deny that this was the colony's primary motivation. While promising that "great Creatures lye long in the Wombe," Donne insisted that his auditors "onely let your principall end, be the propagation of the *glorious Gospell*." If their consciences were "upright," then their "Seals, and Patents, and Commissions, are Wings"; if they had the wrong motives, then their colonizing efforts would proceed "upon weake and feeble Crutches." Once more, the company's boosters appeared to be promising that material reward would attend only the denial of this motive; and after so many people had been killed in Jamestown in 1622, this rhetoric became still less effective.³³

The company soon fell into bankruptcy, and the colony's problems continued. Critics in England and, eventually, New England cast aspersions on the quality of the settlers in Virginia, and especially on the lack of any higher motive that might inspire their enterprise. The company may have been genuine in its efforts to determine such a motive, but the fact of the colony's dependence on London for money, new migrants, and administrative direction suggests that the audience for these discussions of Virginia's providential identity was more English than American. Apart from John Smith, whose residency in America was very brief, no Virginia colonists seem to have speculated in print on a higher purpose for their settlement. While Donne and others tried to identify this purpose, the persistence of self-interest and failure retarded the development of a providential identity for the colony. In spite of their ambitious providentialism, the colony's supporters in London were reluctant to commit their own destinies to the glorious future they projected for Virginia.

"Looking Out for Number One: The Cultural Limits on Public Policy in Early Virginia," in Breen, *Puritans and Adventurers: Change and Persistence in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 106–26.

³³ John Donne, *A Sermon upon the Eighth Verse of the First Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, Preached to the Honourable Company of the Virginian Plantation* (London: Thomas Jones, 1622), 16, 18, 19, 28.

New England: "The Houre for the Worke"

For centuries, Americans have argued that the New England colonists founded a society that was uniquely purposive: a "city on a hill" that would escape from the pitfalls of history and would provide a guiding example for other nations. In recent decades, some historians have questioned the existence of a "mission" among the settlers of Plymouth and Massachusetts, but this debate has turned less on the absolute question of whether the colonists believed they were on an errand from God and more on the relevance of England to the experience of the first colonists.³⁴ This focus is helpful to our inquiry and may allow us to see both the outlines and the limitations of any American errand. American colonists thought about God's plan for their settlements in the context of the Old World as well as the New. If God directed the course of European events, of English history, and of their own migration to America, the colonists had to define a particular role for themselves in this broad Atlantic context. Moreover, their sense of this role could shift dramatically if European events moved in an unexpected direction. In the case of New England, the question of a special providential mission was much more prominent than in Virginia, but it was no less dependent on England.

The explorer John Smith was an early proponent of settlement in New England, and he argued for an English presence along the same lines as the Virginia colony.³⁵ However, the first successful English settlers, the Puritans of Plymouth, had actually been living in Leiden in Holland for nearly fifteen years when they resolved to cross the Atlantic.³⁶ William Bradford, their leader, saw no particular providential purpose to their Dutch migration. The Plymouth settlers had struggled with the cold climate, the difficulty of finding employment, and the distracting permissiveness of their neighbors. The Leiden Puritans were afraid that, if they failed to move again in the early 1620s, they would grow too old and rooted to undertake a further removal in the future, and that their children would become more Dutch than

³⁴ See, for example, Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978); and Avihu Zakai, *Exile and Kingdom: History and Apocalypse in the Puritan Migration to America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). The most extensive critiques of the idea of an original mission or "errand" in the New England colonies are Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); and Joseph A. Conforti, *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity from the Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 11–34.

³⁵ See, for example, his 1616 *Description of New England* and his 1631 *Advertisements for the unexperienced Planters of New England*, in Barbour, ed., 3: 253–307.

³⁶ On the precursors to the Plymouth settlement, see David B. Quinn, "The First Pilgrims," *William and Mary Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (1966): 359–90.

English.³⁷ Robert Cushman, a friend of Bradford's who had been one of the principal organizers of the *Mayflower* voyage before returning to England, attempted in 1622 to arrogate divine approval to the Pilgrims' migration but shied from any grand declaration of providential purpose. He argued that there was no "calling" by which the Puritans had settled in America and that God no longer spoke to his people in miracles or prophecies. "Neither," he continued, "is there any land or possession now, like unto the possession which the Jewes had in *Canaan*, being legally holy and appropriated unto a holy people."³⁸

Cushman's arguments against the idea of a promised land or chosen people were particularly piquant. For English readers, who had been told sporadically since Elizabeth's reign that England might enjoy God's special favor, Cushman disowned a special role for any nation. He noted that "we are all in places strangers and Pilgrims, travellers, and sojourners," and that "our home is no where, but in the heavens." Although Cushman and others held that English settlers might do some good in America through converting the Indians, their purpose for leaving Europe was more pragmatic than religious.³⁹ Ironically, given this proselytizing claim, the most elaborate efforts to read God into the history of Plymouth Colony centered upon the mysterious disease that had depleted the Indian communities along the Massachusetts shore. A number of early historians repeated the tale of a French fishing expedition that had been shipwrecked a few years before the *Mayflower's* arrival, resulting in the capture and killing of three Frenchmen. The last of these, just before he expired, supposedly told the Indians that God would punish them for their cruelty with a terrible plague before giving their land to another people. Early commentators repeated this story uncritically; John Smith even produced it in 1631 to argue that "God hath provided this Country for our Nation, destroying the natives by the plague." This paradoxical role for Indians in the providential scheme – as converts or victims of God's plan – can be dated to the earliest New England settlements. Beyond this important exception, however, Plymouth providentialism was essentially reactive and cautious.⁴⁰

The settlement of Massachusetts was rather different. Whereas the founders of Plymouth Colony occupied a peripheral position in the English-speaking world before 1620 and moved from one outlying area to another, the men who established the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1628 played a prominent and influential role in English religious and political life. But they were increasingly

³⁷ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620–1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 23–25.

³⁸ *A Relation or Journall of the beginning and proceeding of the English Plantation settled at Plimoth in NEW ENGLAND* (London: John Bellamie, 1622), 65–72.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴⁰ Thomas Morton, *New English Canaan; or, New Canaan, Containing an Abstract of New England* (London: Charles Green, 1637), 23; Smith, *Advertisements*, 275–76.

estranged from Stuart England, given their discomfort with the pro-Catholic tilt of the monarchy and with its effects upon the Church of England. James I had alienated Puritan support through his perplexing détente with Spain, in spite of the public's desire for the nation to intervene in the Thirty Years' War on the side of the Protestant combatants. The succession of Charles I caused still more alarm, given the new king's marriage to the Catholic princess Henrietta Maria and his preference for quasi-Catholic practices and doctrine within the Church of England. English Puritans were placed in an awkward position: they contemplated exile in America but required a royal charter to establish a colony there. As in Virginia, a full accounting of the reasons for settlement in Massachusetts was hampered by the impossibility of public candor. Just as Virginia's proponents struggled to admit self-interest as the principal rationale for settlement, the supporters of the Massachusetts Bay Company had to muffle their critique of Charles I as they sought a refuge far from his court.⁴¹

It is clear from the correspondence of leading Puritans, and even from some of the informal promotional materials of the Massachusetts Bay Company, that the urge to escape the oversight of the Church of England was a prominent motive for their departure. John Winthrop, in particular, wrestled with the question of whether to commit himself to the Massachusetts enterprise, writing a number of letters to his friends and his wife in which he tried to clarify both the prospects for religion in England and the possible meaning of a removal to America. Perhaps his clearest instinct was that, given the sins of Charles I and the corruptions within the Anglican Church, "God will bringe some heavye Affliction upon this lande, and that speedlye." By moving to America, he told his wife in 1629, Puritans might find a "hidinge place" from the corrections that were planned for England. John Cotton, a Puritan minister and another of the prominent founders of Massachusetts, shared Winthrop's sense that England might face "desolation" and that it was the responsibility of true believers to remove themselves from God's wrath.⁴²

Friends of Winthrop and Cotton were unimpressed by the proposed exodus. A Suffolk neighbor bluntly told Winthrop in August 1629 that "the church and common welthe heere at home, hath more neede of your beste abylytie in these dangerous tymes, than any remote plantation."⁴³ Cotton actually remained until 1633, when he was forced into exile by William Laud's campaign to enforce

⁴¹ For a summary of the various reasons for the Puritan migration, see Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570-1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundru Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1991), 108-37.

⁴² John Winthrop to his wife, May 15, 1629, in Worthington C. Ford et al., eds., *Winthrop Papers*, 6 vols. (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1929-92), 2: 91; and John Cotton, *God's Promise to his Plantations* (Boston: Samuel Green, 1686; originally published 1634), 9. On Winthrop's anxieties, see Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958), 34-53; and Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 147-70.

⁴³ Robert Ryece to Winthrop, August 12, 1629, in *Winthrop Papers*, 2: 105.

religious orthodoxy. Even so, one of the first letters Cotton received in New England was from an English Puritan who demanded to know his reasons for leaving. Cotton responded that he was following providential orders: God had “shutt a dore” in England, but was now “openinge a dore to us” in America. If Cotton had stayed at home, he would have defied “[God’s] ordinance, & providence together, calling us forth to Minister here.”⁴⁴ John Winthrop, meanwhile, was careful to avoid identifying New England as a chosen land. In the “General Observations,” which he drafted in 1629 to promote migration to America, Winthrop argued (as Robert Cushman had done for Plymouth Colony) that the church was “universal” and that “he that doeth good in any place doeth serve the church in all places.”⁴⁵ While Winthrop and Cotton were keen to argue that England faced great danger in the providential scheme, neither was ready to declare that America had replaced England in God’s favor.

Winthrop’s “General Observations” and Cotton’s 1634 tract, *God’s Promise to his Plantations*, admitted that material motives could inspire the migration to America, but the Puritans seemed eager to avoid the example of Virginia even before they left England. To some extent, the disparaging of Virginia was part of a jockeying between the boosters of various colonies in England. (John Smith lamented the efforts of New England’s backers to attack Virginia but conceded that Virginia’s supporters were equally critical of Plymouth and Massachusetts.)⁴⁶ In any case, a number of early governors of Massachusetts Bay contrasted the purported commercialism and venality of Virginia with New England’s nobler ends: “It is not trade that God will set up in these parts,” declared one, “but the profession of his truth.”⁴⁷ New England also distanced itself from Virginia’s strained relationship with the Indians. The great seal of the Massachusetts Bay colony, devised in London in 1629, featured an Indian holding out his hand and saying “Come over and help us.” This quotation, taken from the pleas of the Macedonians to St. Paul in Acts 16, was bolstered by a number of references to conversion in the company’s official documents. The minutes of a company meeting in London in 1629 declared the “maine end of this plantation” to be “the conversion of the salvages.”⁴⁸ The idea of Indian conversion as the “maine end” of the new settlements was repeated in many of the early documents describing Massachusetts, and it inspired John Cotton on

⁴⁴ John Cotton to a minister in England, December 3, 1634, in Bush, ed., 182.

⁴⁵ “General Observations for the Plantation of New England,” in *Winthrop Papers*, 2: 112.

⁴⁶ Smith feared that “the seed of envy, and the rust of covetousnesse” would overcome rival promoters of Virginia and New England: *Advertisements*, 274.

⁴⁷ Sir Henry Vane to Henry Vane Sr., July 28, 1636, in Everett Emerson, *Letters from New England: The Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1629–1638* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), 209. See also Matthew Cradock to John Endicott, February 16, 1629, in Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England*, 5 vols. (Boston: William White, 1853), 1: 385; and Thomas Dudley, “Letter to the Countess of Lincoln, March 1631,” in Peter Force, ed., *Tracts and Other Papers, Relating Principally to the Origin, Settlement, and Progress of the Colonies in North America, from the Discovery of the Country to the Year 1776*, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Wm. Q. Force, 1844), 2: 12.

⁴⁸ Meeting of the Massachusetts Bay Company, April 8, 1629, in Shurtleff, ed., 1: 37e.

his arrival in America in 1634: "Who knoweth whether God have reared this whole Plantation for such an end?"⁴⁹

It seems that the reality of Anglo-Indian contact in the 1630s may have dulled this message somewhat. As in Plymouth colony, Massachusetts leaders offered providential interpretations of their dealings with the Indians that were often contradictory. Even in 1629, as the company's representatives declared on multiple occasions that Indian conversion was their main purpose in America, John Winthrop suggested that the Puritans had title to American land because "God hath consumed these [Indian] nations in a myraculouse plague wherby a great parte of their country is left voyd without inhabitants."⁵⁰ By 1640 Massachusetts settlers had waged a bloody war with the Pequots and had embraced Indian removal as a providential injunction. Taunton minister William Hooke grouped the Indians with the Antinomians and suggested that God had intended the expulsion of both.⁵¹ By accepting Christ or by falling on the Puritans' swords, the Indians proved useful to early settlers who sought a providential rationalization for their American adventure. The Indians also provided Puritans with a welcome distraction from those motives for settlement that might more directly challenge England's political and religious hierarchy.⁵²

Perhaps the best summary of the many reasons for moving to Massachusetts was offered by John White, an ardent supporter of the migration who nonetheless opted to stay in England in the 1630s. White's 1630 pamphlet, *The Planters Plea*, arranged the many motives for leaving England in a single framework of providential approval. White began by arguing that God always intended for people both to "replenish and subdue" every part of the earth and to spread the gospel throughout the world; plantations succeeded in both respects, and God had therefore enjoined Christians to people "voyd places" whenever possible.⁵³ Unlike some of his Puritan counterparts, however, White tentatively placed Massachusetts in an eschatological context. He alerted his readers to English

⁴⁹ Cotton, *God's Promise*, 19. For other examples of the apparent centrality of Indian conversion to the colonization of Massachusetts, see Shurtleff, ed., 1: 384, 386.

⁵⁰ Winthrop, "General Observations," 113.

⁵¹ William Hooke, *New Englands Teares, for Old Englands Feares, Preached in a Sermon on July 23, 1640* (London: T.P. for John Rothwell and Henry Overton, 1641), 8.

⁵² For a broad perspective on the contradictory meanings of Indian encounters for early English explorers and settlers, see Alfred A. Cave, "Canaanites in a Promised Land: The American Indian and the Providential Theory of Empire," *American Indian Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1988): 277–97. Paul Stevens offers a very useful account of the early modern rationale for dispossessing and displacing Indians in his "'Leviticus Thinking' and the Rhetoric of Early Modern Colonialism," *Criticism* 35, no. 3 (1993): 441–61; however, he neglects the proselytizing and providential aspects of Indian-European encounters discussed by Cave and central to the present analysis. One recent skeptic toward the idea of the centrality of Indian conversion in early Massachusetts is Richard W. Cogley, *John Eliot's Mission to the Indians before King Philip's War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁵³ John White, *The Planters Plea; or, The Grounds of Plantations Examined, and usuall Objections Answered* (London: William Jones, 1630), 1, 7, 30.

commentators (such as the poet George Herbert) who had recently argued for a westward movement of religion since the beginning of the world; this movement suggested that God's favor would "fall in this last age, upon the Western parts of the world."⁵⁴

While noting that this was "onely a probable argument," White moved beyond even these grandiose speculations of America's importance by linking the New World colonies to the book of Revelation. His argument was simple. If God had intended mass conversions to Christianity before Christ's triumphant return, "the *Indians* must needs be gathered in before that day." This new phase of English colonization was therefore a cause for real eschatological excitement, because it promised to hasten the end times predicted by Bible prophecy: "This is the houre for the worke, and consequently of our duty to endeavour the effecting that which God hath determined." It would be absurd and impious to think that God had played no role in the discovery of America, "one of the most difficult and observeable works of this age." After a century or so in which the Indians had been left alone with the Spaniards, and thereby punished for their idolatry, God now directed English settlers to redeem Native Americans and to prepare the way for Christ's return.⁵⁵

As a counterweight to this prophetic interpretation of America's significance, White was careful to finesse the exact relationship between the new English colonies and their troubled parent. Suggesting that God expected a Protestant nation to correct the "Conquerors cruelty" in America, he argued that England was "in a sort singled out unto that worke," because of all the Reformed Protestant nations it was both the "most Orthodoxe" and the most able to spare the people for this effort. In noting the complaints of many people (from across the religious spectrum) that the "troubled condition" of the Anglican Church made this a particularly inapposite moment for a colonial experiment, White suggested both that the Massachusetts settlement would be a mere extension of England and that the migrants hardly believed "*New-England* safer than olde," a place in which Puritans might avoid "the scourge of God." (White must surely have known the latter presumption was precisely the motive of Winthrop and others for making the journey.) The impression generated by White's *Plea* was in keeping with the cautious interpretive strategy of the Massachusetts settlers themselves. Even though they might privately harbor a desire to escape from England and its likely punishment at God's hands, they recognized the need publicly to plot a providential course for their American colony that neither disavowed nor eclipsed the role of England in God's historical plan.⁵⁶

Perhaps recognizing that his readers might be suspicious of his clever tract, White claimed that he "should be very unwilling to hide any thing I thinke

⁵⁴ Ibid., 12. In his poem "The Church Militant," George Herbert suggested that true religion would leave Europe for "the American Strand" before returning to sweep over the entire world at the moment of Christ's return. See Herbert, *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (Cambridge: T. Buck and R. Daniel, 1633), 184–91.

⁵⁵ White, 12, 15.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 22, 55, 56.

might be fit to discover the uttermost of the intentions of our Planters in their voyage to *New-England*.” He also provided a useful warning against confident generalizations of the colonists’ motivations: “As it were absurd to conceive they have all one minde, so it were more ridiculous to imagine they have all one scope. Necessitie may presse some; Noveltie draw on others; hopes of gaine in time to come may prevaile with a third sort: but that the most and most sincere and godly part have the advancement of the *Gospel* for their maine scope I am confident.”⁵⁷ The history of Massachusetts Bay in the 1630s suggests that White was entirely correct. Migrants were drawn to New England for a variety of reasons, and there was no single understanding of societal purpose or of God’s intentions for the colony. The settlers were united, though, by the need to square their enterprise with God’s wishes and by an ongoing interest in European events. While the roots of a separate providential narrative for America are clearly visible in White’s pamphlet, England had hardly disappeared from the story.

Before 1640, national providentialism played an important but ambiguous role in the promotion of the early English colonies in America. Colonial promoters and early settlers used forms of judicial providentialism to suggest that they enjoyed God’s favor, and supporters of Massachusetts even ventured into apocalyptic providentialism to establish the importance of colonization at this particular moment in European history. But these spokespeople struggled to articulate a consistent or distinctive national providentialism because neither Virginia nor New England could really be called a nation. Virginia’s colonists were extremely dependent on English investors and supply ships; the colonists of Massachusetts, on the other hand, were constrained in their separatism by uncertainty over God’s intentions for England and America. The reluctance of many Puritans to leave England seemed vindicated in 1640, when Charles I was forced to recall Parliament and to abandon his campaign of religious repression. As English events took a dramatic turn in the following decade, New England settlers were more inclined to search for their place in an English providential scheme than to forge an American alternative.

2. “A Constant Correspondence”: 1640–1660

The Uses of England in America

In 1640, as John Winthrop fought with William Fiennes over New England’s providential status, both men were forced to acknowledge that events in England seemed to overshadow anything taking place in America. Charles I, having governed without Parliament for more than a decade and encouraged his bishops to prosecute religious nonconformism, was forced to accept both the return of the legislature and, eventually, the abolition of the episcopacy.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 64–65.

Archbishop Laud was soon confined to the Tower of London, Charles was at war with Scotland, and a distinctive (and Puritan) Parliamentary interest offered both political and military opposition to the king's repression. Understandably, the supply of migrants to America dried up. Worse, as Winthrop noted in 1642, the "thin access of people from England" had thrown the existing Massachusetts colonists into "an unsettled frame of spirit," and had prompted many to abandon the American experiment altogether. While the governor tried to stem the tide, the return of these migrants was entirely logical in the scheme that Winthrop had himself offered in 1629: England's bishops had been dismissed, and so Puritans might now enjoy the freedom in England to worship as their conscience dictated. In addition, the unprecedented nature of Parliament's controversy with the king suggested that England might itself be the theater for the next act of God's providential scheme.⁵⁸

Because Winthrop had already turned his journal into a history by 1640, writing entries retrospectively and with the benefit of hindsight, it is hard to determine whether he was caught up in the expectations of momentous change in England.⁵⁹ Other sources from the 1640s indicate that the colonists were gripped by the English Civil War and aware of its likely effects on New England. Unsurprisingly, the bulk of New England commentary rallied to the parliamentary cause. The poet Anne Bradstreet produced *A Dialogue between Old England and New* in 1642, offering the support of the American colonies to the campaign to burn the miters of bishops and "root out popeling's head."⁶⁰ William Bradford, in the 1646 appendix to his Plymouth journal, admitted that he could never have imagined that "the downfall of the Bishops had been so near, when I first began these scribbled writings (which was about the year 1630)." Having watched events unfold, however, he was clear on their provenance: "It is the Lord's doing, and ought to be marvelous in our eyes."⁶¹ John Cotton, writing in Boston in 1645, saw another "open doore" of providence for English Puritans. Even after the execution of Charles I, Cotton maintained that the actions of Parliament were mandated by God.⁶² All of these colonists resisted the temptation to return to England and join the battle at first hand, but they supported Parliament from afar and squared its actions with God's providential scheme.

⁵⁸ Dunn et al., eds., 416.

⁵⁹ On this process, see *ibid.*, xxiii, xxxiii–xxxvii.

⁶⁰ Anne Bradstreet, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America* (London: Stephen Bowtell, 1650), 180–90.

⁶¹ Bradford, 351.

⁶² John Cotton, *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New-England* (London: Matthew Simmons, 1645), 111; Cotton, *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared*, in Larzer Ziff, ed., *John Cotton on the Churches of New England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 201; and Cotton, "Sermon upon a Day of Publique thanksgiving," in Francis J. Bremer, "In Defense of Regicide: John Cotton on the Execution of Charles I," *William and Mary Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1980): 103–24, at 110–24. See also the 1646 appendix of William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 351.

But what was New England to do? If God did not want the colonists to fight alongside their fellow Puritans at home, could they assume another role in the providential scheme? New England had become a religious and political laboratory for Puritanism in the 1630s, and some colonists in America hoped to present their nascent societies as a template for the kind of government that might succeed the monarchy in England. Ironically, this hope faded as Charles's fortunes diminished. In the interest of building the broadest possible coalition against the king and his supporters, the English Parliament was slow to enforce any particular model of religious belief. This made perfect sense in the English context, but was anathema to many New England Puritans who had spent the 1630s repelling challenges from Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, and other religious dissidents. From the perspective of the guardians of Congregationalism in Boston and New Haven, "liberty of conscience" was scarcely better than the creeping Catholicism of the Caroline regime. Thomas Shepard argued in 1645 that religious toleration, rather than Charles's repression, was the cause of "England's misery."⁶³

While some colonists were appalled by all this, others saw a role for American Puritanism even as its English analogue appeared triumphant. John Cotton suggested in 1648 that England's renovation would be speedier and more successful if Parliament followed the example of the American Congregationalists.⁶⁴ The controversy over toleration in England had a flip side. English commentators, and some staunch friends of American Puritanism, were disturbed by reports of religious repression in Massachusetts and were reluctant to take advice from the colonists. Roger Williams and other dissenters visited England in the 1640s and 1650s, spreading stories of arbitrary power and cruelty toward nonconformists. An especially lurid tale of the whipping of an intransigent Baptist in Boston prompted Richard Saltonstall, one of the most tireless advocates of Massachusetts in England, to upbraid John Cotton in the strongest terms. If these reports were to be believed, suggested Saltonstall, the American Puritans appeared to have "practice[d] those courses in a wildernes, which you went so farre to prevent."⁶⁵

The effect of this disagreement on religious freedom was to confirm New England as peripheral, even irrelevant to the momentous events taking place back home. New Haven minister William Hooke admitted in 1645 that New England was "little dreamt of at this time in any part of Christendome"; if John

⁶³ Thomas Shepard, *Wine for Gospel Wantons; or, Cautions Against Spiritual Drunkenness, Being the Brief Notes of a Sermon Preached . . . June 25, 1645* (Cambridge: John Sherman, 1668), 10. See also Nathaniel Ward, *The Simple Cobler of Aggawam in America*, ed. P. M. Zall (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), 7.

⁶⁴ Cotton, *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared*, 202.

⁶⁵ Richard Saltonstall to John Cotton, late 1651/early 1652, in Bush, ed., 498. Roger Williams resided in England from 1643 to 1644 and again from 1651 to 1654. Saltonstall read of the whipping of Baptist Obadiah Holmes in John Clark's *Ill Newes from New-England; or, A Narrative of New-Englands Persecution, Wherin is Declared that while old England is becoming new, New-England is becoming Old* (1652), in Joseph Hunter, ed., *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 4th ser., 1 (1852): 1-113.

Winthrop had argued in 1630 that the “eies of all the people shall be upon us,” it was clear that the Civil War had directed the attention of Protestants (both in Europe and in America) back toward England.⁶⁶ In trying to articulate a role for American Puritans in the distant conflict with the king, both Hooke and his Massachusetts colleague, Nathaniel Ward, sought military metaphors for their religious sentiment. Ward declared that the Puritan settlers “necessarily abide beyond *Jordan*” but would “send up Armies of prayers to the Throne of Grace.” Hooke, meanwhile, produced a perplexing providential interpretation that suggested that God had “divided” his forces and “sent some to lye in wait in the wilderness to come upon the backs of Gods Enemies with deadly Fastings and Prayer, murtherers that will kill point blanke from one end of the world to the other.” Did these ministers make New Englanders feel that they were participants in the distant battle? And did this dissuade colonists from returning to England to fight in person? This is hard to determine, though both Hooke and Ward soon moved back across the ocean in apparent defiance of their own remote prescriptions.⁶⁷

Although there were certainly peaks and troughs in New England Puritans’ optimism about English events, the two decades after 1640 clearly inhibited the development of a separate providential identity for America. While Nathaniel Ward and Thomas Shepard raised the possibility that Parliament’s endorsement of toleration might contribute to England’s downfall, and (in Shepard’s case) that this might even lead God “to remove the Candlesticks” from England and transfer them to America, the American colonists mostly supported the parliamentary struggle and looked back across the Atlantic for evidence of God’s plans for the world.⁶⁸ As numerous laypeople and ministers made the long journey home, the remaining colonists watched England rather than America for evidence of God’s next move. New England was, in the words of William Hooke, “little dreamt of” at this moment, and its colonists refrained from extending even the modest vistas of providential purpose that had animated the migrants of the 1630s.

The Uses of America in England

The leaders of the parliamentary cause in England had hardly forgotten about America. In spite of the disputes over toleration, Parliament actually requested in 1642 that three of the most prominent ministers in New England – John

⁶⁶ Hooke, *New-Englands Sence, of Old Englands and Irelands Sorrowes* (London: John Rothwell, 1645), 19. For a summary of the careers and beliefs of Thomas Venner, Hugh Peter, and other enthusiastic reverse migrants from New England, see David S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World: Heresy to Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 87–110; and J. F. Maclear, “New England and the Fifth Monarchy: The Quest for the Millennium in Early American Puritanism,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (1975): 223–60. See also Delbanco, 184–214.

⁶⁷ Ward, 67; Hooke, *New-Englands Sence*, 19.

⁶⁸ Thomas Shepard, *The Clear Sun-Shine of the Gospel Breaking Forth upon the Indians in New-England; or, An Historicall Narration of Gods Wonderfull Workings upon sundry of the Indians* (London: R. Cotes for John Bellamy, 1648), [xi].

Cotton, Thomas Shepard, and John Davenport – return to London to advise on the formation of a new system of church government.⁶⁹ The main contribution of America to England, however, was to inspire English hopes that the end times were imminent.⁷⁰ John Cotton played a central role in this, producing sermons and tracts that mapped the narrative of the book of Revelation onto recent European events.⁷¹ But the geography and demography of America also offered tantalizing vistas to English onlookers. From the discovery of the continent to the conversion of the Indians, America seemed to confirm the belief that prophecy and history were converging.

Early modern Christians, as we have seen, were encouraged to consider the more momentous events of their own times against the prophetic schemes of the Bible. According to Revelation, God would present a book detailing future events, and its seven seals would be opened. Seven trumpets would sound. The true church would be menaced by a dragon or beast, the incarnation of Satan. God would pour seven vials of wrath upon the earth. Christ would return, casting Satan into hell for a thousand years and inaugurating a millennium of peace and happiness on earth. Satan would then break free, marshal his forces under the command of two lieutenants, Gog and Magog, and fight Christ and the godly once more at Armageddon. This time, Satan would be consigned to hell forever, the old earth would be razed, and the heavenly city – the New Jerusalem – would descend from above to complete the scheme of human salvation.⁷²

Although Puritans in England and America fervently believed that this scheme would some day come to pass – and that they should watch for the signs that it might already have begun in their own history – the problems with apocalyptic thinking were legion. For one thing, it was extremely hard to agree upon the casting of the prophetic drama. The Catholic Church seemed a good fit for the role of the Beast in the decades after the Reformation, but the myriad other characters in John's vision were harder to map onto contemporary events. Worse, the book of Revelation was only one of several biblical prophecies. The Old Testament prophets and even Christ himself offered visions of the end of the world, and an interpreter of God's plan had to incorporate multiple

⁶⁹ On Parliament's offer, see Bush, ed., 362–65. While Cotton was particularly enthusiastic about the invitation, this proposed embassy was thwarted by Shepard's skepticism and Davenport's failure to find someone to take over his ministerial duties in America.

⁷⁰ For an introduction to this thinking, see Bernard Capp, "The Political Dimension of Apocalyptic Thought," in C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich, eds., *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature: Patterns, Antecedents and Repercussions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 93–124.

⁷¹ See, for example, John Cotton, *The Pouring out of the Seven Vials; or, An Exposition, of the 16. Chapter of the REVELATION, with an Application of it to our Times* (London: Printed for R.S., 1642).

⁷² The exact chronology of this process was a subject of some dispute; the summary presented here follows the events of Revelation, but prophetic interpreters had also to incorporate numerous predictions detailed in Daniel, Ezekiel, and other parts of the Bible. The identity of the Antichrist, and his precise relation to Satan, was especially contentious.

prophecies into a single scheme. Finally, it was virtually impossible to agree upon a historical chronology for these promised events. Some commentators held that the millennium had already taken place and that Christians now faced an enemy piqued by a thousand years of confinement. Others argued that the millennium lay ahead and searched recent history for events that might correspond to the pouring of the vials. In either case, prophetic interpreters believed that the end times were approaching and that they should map God's plan onto current events. This task coupled massive authority to enormous ambiguity. No question was more important than the place of human history in God's predetermined scheme, and yet no question was harder to answer.

The role of America in all this had been the subject of much speculation in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Thomas Brightman, perhaps the most celebrated prophetic commentator in England in the 1640s, focused on Europe rather than America in projecting the end times onto contemporary history.⁷³ (Because Brightman died in 1607, before the establishment of successful English colonies in the New World, America's absence from his interpretation is not surprising.) Another important figure, the Cambridge scholar Joseph Mede, envisaged a central but not altogether reassuring role for America. In his *Clavis Apocalyptica* (1627), he argued that God had set aside the New World from Europe to serve as the battleground for the final clash between Satan and Christ. In the meantime, the armies of darkness would be mustered in America under the command of the mysterious Gog and Magog, who would emerge from the putatively diabolical Indian population. It was Satan who had originally led the Indians across the "Northern ocean" into America, argued Mede, and so one could hardly expect them to turn away from their infernal benefactor. The Spanish conquest of America had consolidated the continent as a stronghold of the Antichrist, and reinforced Mede's sense of its bleak future.⁷⁴

Mede's friend and editor, William Twisse, was a little discomfited by this, especially when John Winthrop and his followers established the Massachusetts Bay Colony soon after the appearance of the original Latin version of Mede's *Key of the Revelation*. Twisse thanked Mede in 1635 for disabusing him of the "odd conceit" that America was to be the location of the New Jerusalem, but he urged his friend to consider whether the colonists of Massachusetts might indicate a more optimistic future for the continent than as a training ground for Gog and Magog. Mede's reply, sensitive to "our better Plantations in those parts," confirmed that Europe was to be the focus of the apocalyptic drama but offered New England a cameo role: perhaps God intended the American Puritans to frustrate Satan for a while through their missionary work and religious

⁷³ Thomas Brightman, *Reverend Mr. Brightmans Judgement; or, Prophecies that shall befall Germany, Scotland, Holland* (London: R. Harford, 1642). For Brightman's importance, and his influence on John Cotton in particular, see Cogley, 10–11.

⁷⁴ Joseph Mede, *The Key of the Revelation* (London: R.B. for Phil. Stephens, 1641). The most recent treatment of Mede is Jeffrey K. Jue, *Heaven upon Earth: Joseph Mede (1586–1638) and the Legacy of Millenarianism* (Springer: Dordrecht, 2006).

profession and thus to “to dazle and torment the Devil at his own home?” Mede recognized that the Puritans were “better Christians” than the Spaniards and suggested that both they and their Indian converts might be “translated” to Christ’s kingdom before the Devil escaped from his long captivity.⁷⁵

Mede’s difficulties in imagining America as the site of the New Jerusalem reflected the hopes of European Protestants that their own continent might be rewarded at the culmination of the prophetic scheme. Twisse’s reluctance to concede America to Satan, however, was grounded in an emerging English fascination with the eschatological significance of the American Indians. While the book of Revelation encouraged an interest in the conversion of any nonbeliever to Christianity, the Pequot War of 1636–37 and the diseases that had ravaged the coastal Indians of New England had curtailed the providential significance of evangelism among Native Americans. In 1648 John Cotton despaired of the patchy proselytizing efforts by noting that, in his reading of Revelation, “there will be no great hope of any national conversion, till Antichrist be ruined, and the Jews converted.”⁷⁶ But what if the Indians actually *were* the Jews, a lost tribe that had somehow wandered to America and forgotten the fact of its origins? If this were true, then the conversion of American Indians would be a priority not only for New England colonists but also for those supporters of the English Parliament who believed that their own political struggle would inaugurate the end times.

Like so many other ideas about America in the seventeenth century, the identification of the Indians as Jews originated with the Spaniards. New England ministers, like their counterparts back home, looked to adapt the theory to the realities of English colonization. John Eliot, the most prominent English missionary to the Indians in the seventeenth century, hoped that the Massachusetts Indians might be a lost tribe of Israel. Roger Williams was also a strong proponent of the idea. Williams wrote in December 1635 to an English minister from Norfolk, Thomas Thorowgood, stressing that Indian languages had “some tast of affinity with the Hebrew” and suggesting as well that Indian creation myths pointed loosely in the direction of the Holy Land.⁷⁷ Thorowgood, initially skeptical of this hypothesis, embarked on a fifteen-year study of Scripture, history, geography, and ethnography in order to establish whether the Indians were actually Jewish.

As Thorowgood chased his hypothesis through Scripture and the makeshift anthropology of Spanish missionaries, political events in England only encouraged the public’s appetite for the apocalyptic: the downfall of the bishops and

⁷⁵ Joseph Mede, *The Works of the Pious and Profoundly-Learned Joseph Mede* (London: James Flesher for Richard Royston, 1664), 992, 981.

⁷⁶ Cotton, *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared*, 274.

⁷⁷ Williams to Thorowgood, December 20, 1635, in Glenn W. LaFantasie, ed., *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, 2 vols. (Hanover, N.H.: Brown University Press/University Press of New England, 1988), 1: 30–31.

the execution of the king suggested to many onlookers that Christ would soon appear in person. Parliament, meanwhile, was responsible not only for defeating the king's tyranny but for focusing the English people on their role in the providential scheme – and investigating such topics as the genealogy of Native Americans. The Dutch rabbi Menasseh Ben Israel dedicated his 1650 treatise on this subject to Parliament and urged its members to heed their duty in this regard: “[I]t is not only not unprofitable, but very usefull for States, and Statesmen, to fore-see the issue (which yet is ever in Gods hand) of humane Counsels, that so they may observe, and understand from Divine truth, the events of things to come, which God hath determined by his Spirit in his holy Prophets.” The wondrous drama in England, in which Parliament had played so prominent a role, encouraged the anticipation (and investigation) of still more momentous events in the future.⁷⁸

Ben Israel hedged his bets on the Jewish ancestry of the Indians. He argued that a band of Jews had once been in America, had left their cultural mark on the Indians, but had long since moved on. His conclusions were sufficiently provocative, though, to prompt his English translator (and perhaps his readers) to proclaim that the end times had arrived. This view was bolstered by the eventual appearance of Thomas Thorowgood's exhaustive study, published in England that same year under the bold title *Jewes in America*. This ambitious interpretation of prophecy and history, which moved through three editions between 1650 and 1652, held that Native Americans were not, in fact, native to America, but had removed there at some point after the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE. God had intended England to colonize America in the seventeenth century and had protected the Puritan settlement of New England as an instrument for the conversion of the Indians. Thorowgood admitted that many tall tales had been circulating in England amid the recent political chaos, and he conceded that his readers lived in “an age much enclining to Enthousiasmes and Revelations.” But he maintained that his conclusions were based upon sound scriptural and historical research, and could be considered a reliable guide to the course of providence in the final stages of the prophetic drama.⁷⁹

Thorowgood's tract was prefaced by a letter from the Puritan minister John Dury, who confessed that he had initially been skeptical of the identification of Indians as Jews. Dury had changed his mind not only because of Thorowgood's arguments but “from the observations of Gods way, which he seemed to make by all these changes, and the dissolution of the States and Empires of the world, towards some great worke.” Even Thorowgood's own long journey in researching the book persuaded Dury of “the strangeness of Gods conduct over your spirit,” so that he now “stood amazed” at the integrity of Thorowgood's conclusions. God intended Indian conversion to preface the apocalypse

⁷⁸ Menasseh Ben Israel, *The Hope of Israel* (London: R.I. for Hannah Allen, 1650), [iv–v].

⁷⁹ Thomas Thorowgood, *Jewes in America; or, Probabilities that the Americans are of that Race* (London: W.H. for Thomas Slater, 1650), [xi].

but had also fashioned this amazing story to remind believers that the world conformed to a providential plan:

For when it shall appeare to all men undeniably, that the transmigration of Nations, and the affaires of this world, have not been carried hitherto by meere chance, or by the craftinesse of humane counsels, or by force; but by the wisdom of a Supream conduct, who hath ordered all things from the beginning towards an end which hath been foreknowne, and to a designe foretold. (I say) when this shall appeare, and that in the midst of all these changes and confusions, there is a conduct over-ruling the force of man, and disappointing the counsels of the crafty; then the eyes of all men will be upon the Lord, and God alone will be exalted in righteousness, and the Holy one of Israell in judgement[.]

Dury was thrilled both at the prospect of Indian conversion and at this solid evidence of God's control over history. Thorowgood, meanwhile, prescribed a "constant correspondence between New and Old England" to ensure that the work of Indian conversion received the highest priority.⁸⁰

In these unlikely conjectures, New England found another providential meaning even amid the dramatic events of the English Civil War. Parliament, buoyed by assessments of the Indians' importance, created a committee in 1649 to propagate the work of New England missionaries.⁸¹ The committee circulated accounts of Indian conversion throughout England and sought donations to further the proselytizing work of American ministers like John Eliot and Thomas Mayhew.⁸² Those ministers obliged their benefactors by offering more stories of their spiritual victories among the Indians and even by endorsing the eschatological hopes of Thorowgood and others. Henry Whitefield, a New England preacher who returned to England in 1650 to shepherd these stories through the London presses, brought letters from Eliot and Mayhew that appeared to confirm the notion that the Indians were Jews and to vindicate Parliament's decision to seek providential meaning in the progress of American missions. In a 1653 tract heralding further Indian conversions, Eliot offered a dedication to Oliver Cromwell and an Atlantic framework in which to understand the hastening of the prophetic scheme: Cromwell was to engage in the "Wars of the Lamb" in Europe, and the New England preachers (supported by the English Parliament) were to "raise up His own Kingdom" in America, thus offering "confirmation" that "the Lords time is come." Although Eliot became less certain as the decade proceeded that the Indians were in fact Jews, he continued to send dispatches of Indian success to his English backers and to

⁸⁰ Ibid., [xxix–xxx], 93.

⁸¹ Cogley, 70–71.

⁸² Ibid., 66–68. The so-called Eliot tracts, the ten missionary reports prepared for an English audience in the late 1640s and 1650s, offered numerous endorsements of the Indians' Jewish provenance. Edward Winslow and John Dury gave first voice to the claim in a preface and appendix to Eliot's 1649 tract *The Glorious Progress of the Gospel amongst the Indians in New England* (London: Edward Winslow, 1649).

emphasize America's role in an ongoing drama that seemed principally focused on England.⁸³

Regardless of the provenance of the Indians, John Eliot believed that their conversion and organization into "praying towns" in America might offer a model for a republican England. In 1651 and 1652, as the squabbles of the English Parliament began to taint Cromwell's extraordinary victories, Eliot offered his suggestions for a form of godly rule in a book entitled *The Christian Commonwealth*. Native Americans, isolated from Europe, had avoided the corrupting influence of secular politics and history. They were therefore perfect subjects for the imposition of a Christian mode of governance derived from Mosaic principles; and their initial acceptance of these systems, as implemented by Eliot and others in America, indicated that the "Christian commonwealth" was now ready for export to England. Again, Eliot appeared to have found a providential role for America – as England's "spiritual factory" – even as the eyes of American Puritans were turned toward Europe. The Indians, whose capacity for providential significance seemed almost endless, relieved Eliot from the need to assert America's apocalyptic primacy. His converts provided a broader conception of prophetic geography that helped to assuage the isolation of New England.⁸⁴

The English Puritans projected their millennialism onto America in one further regard. Beyond the praying Indians of New England lay the vast continent of Spanish America, containing both material riches and, in the Native Americans, a bottomless reservoir of potential converts.⁸⁵ Given the providential injunction to win every soul for Christ before his return, Oliver Cromwell began in the early 1650s to indulge a fantastic idea: could England sweep Spain from the Americas, and would this audacious effort trigger the final events of the book of Revelation? Cromwell had already been in touch with John Cotton after his triumph in the Civil War. "What is the Lord a doing?" Cromwell asked rhetorically in 1651. "What prophesies are now fulfilling?"⁸⁶ Although

⁸³ John Eliot and Thomas Mayhew, *Tears of Repentance; or, A further Narrative of the Progress of the Gospel amongst the Indians in New-England* (London: Peter Cole, 1653), [xvii–xviii]. See also John Eliot, *A Late and Further Manifestation of the Progress of the Gospel amongst the Indians in New-England* (London: M.S., 1655), [v].

⁸⁴ John Eliot, *The Christian Commonwealth; or, The Civil Policy of the Rising Kingdom of Jesus Christ* (London: Livewell Chapman, n.d. [1659]). Richard Cogley, 76, dates the composition of Eliot's book to 1651–52.

⁸⁵ The idea that Spain's American empire was vulnerable to an English attack had gained limited currency in England from the reports of Thomas Gage, an English-born renegade who had spent many years in Spanish America as a Catholic convert before returning to England and Protestantism in the 1640s. See his *The English-American his Travail by Sea and Land; or, A New Survey of the West-Indias* (London: R. Cotes, 1648), [iii].

⁸⁶ Oliver Cromwell to John Cotton, October 2, 1651, in Bush, ed., 469. Richard Cogley, 82, has suggested that Cromwell's questions ("What is the Lord a doing?") were grounded in anxiety, or perhaps even frustration that Cotton had not clarified God's role in recent English history in an earlier letter to Cromwell. The generally triumphal tone of Cromwell's letter (composed after

many of the letters between the men are lost, a near contemporary of Cotton's reported in the 1690s that Cromwell sought specific advice of Cotton soon after this 1651 letter: should England attack Hispaniola, Spain's oldest American colony and its redoubt in the Caribbean? Cotton's alleged response – that this action would “dry up Euphrates” – was an explicit reference to Revelation, implying that a successful invasion would correspond to the pouring of the sixth vial. Christ's return, Cotton apparently told Cromwell, would follow the invasion.⁸⁷

It is impossible to verify this story, and we should recall that Cotton died two years before the eventual English expedition to the Caribbean. However, there is little doubt that Cromwell believed fervently in the providential significance of his Hispaniola invasion and that this supernatural conviction blinded him to the military and political consequences of failure. His motivations also inclined him toward secrecy. Cromwell dispatched thirty-eight ships (incongruously commanded by an admiral and a general) to the Caribbean on Christmas Day 1654, but the invasion force was disorganized and short on supplies. The first report of an invading army created panic in the Spanish capital of Santo Domingo in April 1655, but the English troops landed more than twenty miles to the west and quickly became disoriented and fatigued by the island's dense forests. By the time they confronted the Spanish defenders, they were easily routed. Cromwell's fleet regrouped and seized the poorly defended island of Jamaica from Spain in the following weeks, but the stigma of the Hispaniola defeat was enormous. Cromwell, on learning the news, withdrew for days to ponder the providential import of this failure.⁸⁸

While Cromwell and his advisers, including John Milton, published a pugnacious defense of England's attack on Spanish America, his critics charged that God had clearly demonstrated his disapproval of the Protector's autocratic rule.⁸⁹ An anonymous pamphlet entitled *Hypocrisy Discovered* circulated through London in the last months of 1655, noting that even the sailors in Cromwell's expedition had concluded that “this was not other than the Lords own finger against them.” Sir Henry Vane, the former governor of Massachusetts who had emerged as one of Cromwell's strongest critics in England, blamed the Lord Protector directly. Noting that there had been “a great silence

the Battle of Worcester, which ended the Civil Wars), however, points strongly to an excited and rhetorical deployment of these questions on Cromwell's part, or at least to a more optimistic (if pious and awed) discussion of providential purpose than Cogley has suggested.

⁸⁷ Samuel Sewall, a Massachusetts minister, reported in the 1690s on the supposed correspondence between Cromwell and Cotton over Hispaniola: Bush, ed., 461–62; and Kupperman, *Providence Island*, 349–50.

⁸⁸ Blair Worden, “Oliver Cromwell and the Sin of Achan,” in Derek Beales and Geoffrey Best, eds., *History, Society and the Churches: Essays in Honour of Owen Chadwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 125–45.

⁸⁹ [Oliver Cromwell], *A Declaration of His Highness, by the advice of his Council; setting forth, on the behalf of this commonwealth, the justice of their cause against Spain* (London: Henry Hill and John Field, 1655). Milton assisted Cromwell in drafting the declaration, and produced a Latin translation that was published in the same year.

in Heaven” since Cromwell’s momentous victories in the Civil War, Vane invoked the biblical story of the sin of Achan in which an entire nation was ruined because of the improprieties of a single person. Had Cromwell become a liability to England? His critics maintained that this was the case, and Cromwell was crippled by doubts about the course of providence in the two years before his death in 1658.⁹⁰

American observers, meanwhile, had lost confidence in the imminence of the end times by 1653, as Parliament was dissolved for the last time and Cromwell declared himself Lord Protector. Closer to home, they also witnessed the failure of both American schemes that were intended to realize the Bible’s prophecies. Indian conversions tailed off in the later 1650s, in spite of Eliot’s effort to maintain a ready supply of conversion narratives to his London audience; and the attack on Hispaniola, with its promise of a rollback of Spain’s American empire (and the pouring of the penultimate vial), ended in disaster. In the wake of his Caribbean defeat, Cromwell promised that England would persist in promoting the conversion of the Indians. He hailed this as the “principall end of the late expedition” to Hispaniola and promised that the providential “mists” would soon be “dispelled and cleared.”⁹¹ In reality, the American annex of Cromwell’s prophetic program collapsed as surely as its English core. The mists were never dispelled, and Cromwell struggled in his final years to combat renegade apocalypse enthusiasts who believed that he had become an impediment to the return of Christ’s kingdom, or even that he was himself the Antichrist.⁹²

Perhaps God intended things to get much worse before Christ returned. The extreme millenarians of London certainly thought so, and this point of view also appealed to Roger Williams (now safely restored to Rhode Island). If this was true, the providential wheel had come full circle since 1630, and Winthrop and Cotton had been right to imagine New England as a refuge rather than a theater for the final stages of human history: “I feare that many precious Soules will be glad to hide their heads (shortly) in these parts,” wrote Williams to Winthrop’s son, John Winthrop Jr., in February 1660. Three months later, as Charles II returned to England to receive his father’s crown, it seemed that the efforts of the past two decades – and all the providential meanings therein – had come to nothing.⁹³

⁹⁰ *Hypocrisie Discovered* (London: n.p., n.d. [1655]), 13; [Sir Henry Vane], *A Healing Question Propounded and resolved upon occasion of the late publique and seasonable Call to Humiliation* (London: T. Brewster, 1656), 22; and Worden, “Oliver Cromwell and the Sin of Achan,” 135–40.

⁹¹ *A Declaration of His Highnes*, 142.

⁹² Bernard Capp, “The Fifth Monarchists and Popular Millenarianism,” in J. F. McGregor and B. Reay, eds., *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 165–89; and Christopher Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 121.

⁹³ Williams to Winthrop Jr., February 6, 1660, in LaFantasie, ed., 2: 495. In the same letter, Williams claimed that he had conversed in London with Cromwell and “the late renowned Oliver confest to me in close discourse . . . that he Yet feard great Persecutions to the Protestants from the Romanists before the Downfall of the Papacie.” Williams thus suggested that even Cromwell had come to believe that things would get much worse in Europe before the millennium arrived.

3. “To Rip Up the Womb of Time”: 1660–1700

Because New England had cheered on the cause of Parliament and Cromwell, the Restoration could have created an enduring political problem for the American colonies. In the event, Charles II turned a blind eye to New England's disloyalty, and the colonies returned the favor by pretending that they had always been loyal to the monarchy.⁹⁴ The problem of the providential roles of England and America was more troublesome. Since 1640, Puritans in the American colonies and in England had believed that the end times were approaching, or at least that God had great plans for this moment in history. The complete collapse of the English commonwealth threw everything into confusion. Had God decided, after all, that England and its colonies were unworthy of his support? Had Cromwell and his followers squandered their opportunity to trigger the prophetic scheme? In New England, where Puritans still controlled the pulpits and the sites of political influence, the demise of the Commonwealth once more prompted questions about the purpose of the American colonies, particularly because the previous conceptions of an American “errand” – to take refuge from the oppression of Charles I, to bring the Indians to Christ, or to export a model of perfect church government to England and other Protestant nations – had not been realized.

New England's response to this crisis was simple: in an effort to avoid both the chaotic events of recent English history and the burden of Cromwell's failure, colonists began to narrate America's history in isolation from England. Instead of discussing the New World's importance in relation to European events, providential commentators limited God's involvement to the American colonies. Although this model of providential understanding was not completely new – earlier exceptionalist understandings had circulated before 1660 – it attained wide popularity in the decades after the Restoration precisely because it seemed to solve the interpretive problems that followed the English Civil War. Even as English ministers – scarred by Cromwell's rule – worked to keep providence out of politics, American commentators suggested that God had directed the development of the American colonies. The consequence was a divergence of providential interpretation between England and America.⁹⁵

“Confused Times”: English Providentialism after the Restoration

After one final wave of radical millenarianism in the streets of London – the “fifth monarchy” uprising in 1661, led by former New England colonist Thomas Venner – the belief that the end times were actually at hand was comprehensively

⁹⁴ On New England's response to the Restoration, see T. H. Breen, *The Character of the Good Ruler: A Study of Puritan Political Ideas in New England, 1630–1730* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 87–133. Some particularly prominent supporters of Cromwell, like John Eliot, were invited by the Massachusetts General Court to make their apologies in public. See Shurtleff, ed., 4 (part 2): 5–6.

⁹⁵ On the importance of the post-Restoration period for the development of a distinctive New England identity, see Conforti, 35–57.

crushed.⁹⁶ In place of those Puritan ministers who had, for two decades, folded the triumphs of Parliament and Cromwell into a divine plan, Anglican preachers returned to their pulpits in late 1660 to argue that the rebellion had been a judgment of God upon the nation's sins. In addition to providing a revisionist history of the recent past, these ministers also sought to prevent any future political mischief from acquiring providential momentum.⁹⁷

Surprisingly, a core text in this effort was by a Puritan minister. John Wilkins, a former chaplain of William Fiennes and the warden of Wadham College in Oxford, was both an opponent of the monarchy and, from 1656, the husband of Oliver Cromwell's sister, Robina. Wilkins was skeptical of some of the more extravagant uses of providence in parliamentary rhetoric, and his 1649 *Discourse Concerning the Beauty of Providence* was out of step with most Puritan attempts to ascertain God's will during the 1640s and 1650s. Wilkins accepted that God's providence might be most evident in "these disturbed confused times," but he urged his readers to "remember [that] we are but short-sighted, and cannot discern the various references, and dependences, amongst the great affairs in the world, and therefore may be easily mistaken in our opinion of them." It was impossible to see the scheme of providence entire, and absent this synoptic perspective it would be foolish to tailor one's actions too closely to providential interpretations. By attempting to "bind Providence," an interpreter would not only be defeated in his objective but would "meet with a curse instead of it." After the Restoration, Wilkins's words seemed particularly prescient. His tract was published again in 1672 in an edition identical to the 1649 text.⁹⁸

Wilkins's theme was embraced by many other English commentators after 1660. William Gearing maintained in 1662 "that there is a divine Providence," but warned that "God's wayes and providences toward the Nations for divers years together have seemed dark and cloudy."⁹⁹ Another providential theorist, Thomas Crane, recalling the "mists and fogs" that surrounded God's intentions, argued that human knowledge of providence "is imperfectly apprehensive, not comprehensive."¹⁰⁰ Stephen Charnock's 1680 *Treatise of Divine Providence* warned that "errors will be committed in reading the Books of Providence, if we fix our eyes only in one place and make a full stop where God hath not

⁹⁶ On the uprising, see Lovejoy, 107; and Maclear, 256–57.

⁹⁷ For an overview, see John Spurr, "'Virtue, Religion and Government': The Anglican Uses of Providence," in Tim Harris, Paul Seaward, and Mark Goldie, eds., *The Politics of Religion in Restoration England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 29–47.

⁹⁸ John Wilkins, *A Discourse Concerning the Beauty of Providence* (London: Sa. Gellibrand, 1649), 63, 72, 104–5. Wilkins himself, having helped to found the Royal Society in 1660, soon found his way back into the king's favor, and became bishop of Chester before his death in 1672.

⁹⁹ William Gearing, *The Eye and Wheel of Providence; or, A Treatise Proving that there is a divine Providence* (London: Francis Tyton, 1662), 346.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Crane, *Isagoge ad Dei Providentiam; or, A Prospect of Divine Providence* (London: A. Maxwell for Edward Brewster, 1672), 10, 74.

made any.” Each of these authors reaffirmed the existence of providence and acknowledged that Christians should search for God’s purposes in everyday events. On balance, however, such interpretation should be tempered with caution: “We must search into [providence],” said Charnock, “though we are not able to find out all the reasons of it.”¹⁰¹

English ministers in the Restoration period urged a kind of providential quietism upon their followers. William Gearing criticized anyone who would “make Providence whistle to his own tune, as the manner of too many in our dayes hath been.” Such men frequently interpreted the success of their evil designs to mean providential approval: “Because God hath not presently executed vengeance upon their abominations, therefore they have pleaded necessity, and brought in providence for the approbation of them.” In time, Gearing insisted, God would punish them for their crimes, but it was important that the English people learn from the example of the Civil War that immediate success did not necessarily indicate God’s approval for an action.¹⁰² Thomas Smith, in his 1693 *Discourse Concerning Divine Providence*, noted that a proper respect for God’s plan necessitated that “we must not presume to justifie any evil action by it, as if success of itself were a sufficient proof, encouragement and approbation of it.” After all, Smith reminded his readers, “we cannot but remember, how this was the common theme and topick in the late times, I mean before the year 1660.”¹⁰³

Perhaps the starkest attack on the political uses of providence came from Samuel Herne, who insisted in 1679 on the limited reach of human observation:

To know what is to come, to look into Ages yet unborn, to rip up the Womb of Time, to fortel the Changes of Empire, and the Moving Sands of Mighty Monarchies; to foresee the Grand Revolutions of this Globe of Earth, (beyond what may be gathered by Observation, and founded upon Presumption) these things are too deep for the Scantling of Humane Nature to reach, the Object lies too far to be discovered by the dim, and narrow sight of a Mortal Eye: In vain therefore do Men gaze upwards to read their Destiny in the Stars, when the Periods of Time, and the Stages of Humane Life are only Registered in the Kingdom of Heaven[.]¹⁰⁴

Given the force of these attacks, we might reasonably ask why providentialism did not disappear entirely from English religious and intellectual life during the Restoration period. It survived because Anglicans and nonconformists feared that a complete dismissal of providence would encourage religious skepticism. While English commentators distanced themselves from the apocalyptic providentialism that had swept the nation during the Civil War, they were simultaneously threatened by a wave of skeptical thinking (both English and

¹⁰¹ Stephen Charnock, *A Treatise of Divine Providence* (London: Thomas Cockrill, 1680), 367, 368.

¹⁰² Gearing, 344.

¹⁰³ Thomas Smith, *A Discourse Concerning Divine Providence, in Relation to National Judgments* (London: Randal Taylor, 1693), 28.

¹⁰⁴ Samuel Herne, *A Discourse of Divine Providence, Made Before an Honourable Auditory* (London: T. Newcomb for G. Kunholt, 1679), 16–17.

European) that rejected God's control over history. Providential quietism was pitched between these two extremes of enthusiasm and denial: God was still responsible for England's destiny, but his purposes could not and should not be closely analyzed.

An obvious compromise for providential theorists, which would combine piety with political caution, was the promotion of personal rather than national providentialism. John Flavel, author of a 1678 tract on *The Myserie of Providence*, urged his audience to compile "the History of our own lives" instead of the history of nations, and he promised that this personal narrative would be "the pleasantest history that ever we read."¹⁰⁵ Others argued for stoicism in the political sphere. A 1683 pamphlet maintained that, because God had appointed kings to reign over their subjects, God himself would depose a monarch if liberty were threatened. Without this providential intervention, it would be impious for subjects to "supersede" providence by challenging a king, an action that would "forego our greatest security" and result in a "fight against God." God cared for England not by encouraging political resistance to tyranny but by watching over the nation – ensuring, say, that the hostile (and more numerous) populations of France and Spain were kept at bay by the seas that surrounded the British Isles.¹⁰⁶

And what of the Bible's prophetic promises, or England's role as God's chosen nation? The quietists argued that the events of Revelation would work themselves out at an imperceptibly low speed: the Scriptures suggested that even the Antichrist would "die a natural death, not a violent one."¹⁰⁷ While the question of England's special status in God's eyes reemerged in the 1680s, during another moment of hostility toward the Stuart monarchy, even those who hoped that God had a special regard for England took pains to qualify their meaning. Abraham Campion, a minister from Buckinghamshire, admitted in 1694 that England might be specially favored by God, but he also suggested that any Christian nation could "have as good a title to the temporal promises of God, as being his peculiar chosen people, as ever the *Jewish* had." Campion added cautiously that, while "the Providence of God" might be "a good rule of after-compliance," it was "for several reasons not always a good rule of action." Thus the post-Reformation sense of national providentialism in England was seriously diminished. Believers were asked to recognize God's hand in human events but were discouraged from harnessing this recognition to political ends.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ John Flavel, *Divine Conduct; or, The Myserie of Providence* (London: R.W. for Francis Tyton, 1678), [xiii], 267.

¹⁰⁶ John Goodman, *The Interest of Divine Providence in the Government of the World* (London: Richard Royston, 1683), 24, 26; and John Collinges, *Several Discourses concerning the Actual Providence of God* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1678), 93–94.

¹⁰⁷ Collinges, 255. See also Gerald M. Straka, *Anglican Reaction to the Revolution of 1688* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1962), 65–79.

¹⁰⁸ Abraham Campion, *A Sermon Concerning National Providence* (Oxford: Anthony Piesley, 1694), 31, 33.

“A Little Nation”: New England and Historical Providentialism

While most New England tracts between 1640 and 1660 looked to England for evidence of God’s providential design, one book that crossed the Atlantic at the height of Cromwell’s triumph offered a defiantly unfashionable American exceptionalism. Edward Johnson, a joiner and a member of the town government in Woburn, Massachusetts, spent 1650 and 1651 working on a *History of New-England*, in which he identified America rather than Europe as the fulcrum of God’s plan. Johnson, who lived in Kent before he moved to Boston in the 1630s, must have known that he would disappoint English readers by ignoring the eschatological significance of Parliament’s victories, the regicide, and the rise of Cromwell. His book fared badly in London on its release in 1653, and its desperate publisher eventually tried to sneak the unsold pages into a different account of New England in 1659. But Johnson’s assertion of America’s place in a divine scheme attained wide currency in post-Restoration New England.¹⁰⁹

While Johnson was aware of both the extraordinary events in England after 1640 and the interest of many American colonists in returning to Europe, his *History* refuted the suggestion that the Civil War had rendered the American colonies peripheral or redundant. Noting that God had “raised an *Army* out of our *English* Nation” for the voyage to Massachusetts, and that this had occurred when England “began to decline in Religion,” Johnson largely ignored the English Revolution and continued to catalog “the marvelous doings of Christ” in New England. God, by destroying the local Indian populations through disease, “not onely made roome for his people to plant; but also tamed the hard and cruell hearts of these barbarous Indians.” The colonists were “the forerunners of Christ’s army,” and the “wonderful providences” that had sustained New England were part of God’s plan to “proclaime to all Nations,” through the success of his American church, “the approach of the most wonderfull workes that ever the Sonnes of men saw.” Crucial to Johnson’s providential vision was the notion that New England had already become a nation: “Will not you believe that a Nation can be borne in a day?” he asked his readers. From Johnson’s perspective, the act of separating the American colonists from England was not an opportunistic response to a temporary political crisis but a crucial stage in God’s greater plan. Moreover, the course of New England history to date suggested further divine favors in the future.¹¹⁰

Johnson briefly addressed the fear that New England’s recent problems – reverse migration, the rise of a commercial mind-set in the seaports, and the challenge of religious nonconformism – compared unfavorably to the “miraculous and wonderful” events in England. However, he rejected the bleak view

¹⁰⁹ On the publication history, see the introduction in Edward Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence of Sions Saviour in New England*, ed. J. Franklin Jameson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910).

¹¹⁰ Edward Johnson, *A History of New-England, from the English Planting in the Yeere 1628 untill the Yeere 1652* (London: Nath. Brooke, 1654), 1, 15, 17, 34, 173. Johnson’s question about a nation “borne in a day” was presumably inspired by the celebrated prophetic vision of Isaiah 66:8.

that God was displeased with the colonists, and insisted that “he hath some further great work to do with his N.E. people, that he is beginning to awaken, rouze up, and quicken them with the rod of his power.” Even America’s apparent estrangement from the Civil War was compatible with a special providential role. While God had raised up the English Parliament to wage war against Satan, the New England settlers composed the “left Wing” of God’s spiritual army in this battle against the Antichrist. In his brief engagement with the incredible events in England, Johnson arrayed the forces of good and evil so that New England seemed essential to the conflict.¹¹¹

Johnson’s achievement in his *History* was to apply to New England a version of national providentialism that seemed ambitious and purposive but was less reliant on the course of events than the apocalypticism that had gripped many of Cromwell’s followers. Although he was aware of the possibility that the end of the world might be imminent, he declined to map the details of prophecy onto American history. His account of New England’s progress located God’s purpose and achievement in the establishment and expansion of an American “nation,” and made only vague reference to the “wonderful workes” that lay ahead in the divine scheme. This historical providentialism plotted New England’s brief career on an upward vector and then extended this trajectory far into the future.

Johnson did not invent this form of national providentialism, nor was it necessarily American in its aspect. English authors had constructed their own versions since the early years of the seventeenth century, running a single thread of divine favor through historical events like the defeat of the Spanish Armada or the discovery of the gunpowder plot. Even in the last years of the Civil War, the English author Richard Hawkins completed a *Discourse of the Nationall Excellencies of England*, which promised that, in the light of divine favors from 1588 to the present, the English might move into the future “backt by omnipotency.” The only wrinkle in Hawkins’s vision was the recent defeat in the “unfortunate woods of Hispaniola,” which he hoped might yet be forgotten in the onward march of the nation’s successes. Sadly for Hawkins, the Restoration would occlude this glorious future. After Charles II’s accession, English providential theorists deterred anyone from claiming to be on the side of “omnipotency” in their political actions. Edward Johnson, by contrast, had shaped America’s far shorter history into a coherent and unbroken narrative of divine favor, partly by finessing its awkward relationship with England. Insisting that God had “some great work” for New England, but resisting the temptation to proclaim opened seals or poured vials in the brief career of the English settlements, Johnson cleverly insulated America’s future from the dangers and disappointments of prophetic literalism.¹¹²

In Restoration New England, historical providentialism was employed not only to assure colonists that America was specially favored by God but also to

¹¹¹ Ibid., 217.

¹¹² Richard Hawkins, *A Discourse of the Nationall Excellencies of England* (London: Thomas Newcomb for Henry Fletcher, 1657), 94, 88.

rebuke those miscreants who threatened the Congregational hierarchy. Religious nonconformists, worldly merchants, or dissolute individuals could be presented as enemies not only of the colonial authorities but also of God's plan for the continent. Thus the jeremiads produced in New England after 1660 advanced a relatively consistent set of arguments: God had been extraordinarily generous to New England, he intended the colonies to play a special role in the scheme of human salvation, and he would withdraw his favor only if his people turned against him. England disappeared almost completely from this framework. Samuel Danforth, Urian Oakes, Thomas Shepard, and other ministers sharpened their attacks on a recalcitrant people by identifying New England as a "city on a hill" or a candlestick that illuminated the entire world. God was now testing the colonists to see if they would realize their central role in the world's salvation or "imitate other nations" in sin and forfeit their providential responsibility.¹¹³

These authors repeatedly emphasized the need to compile histories of New England that would confirm God's providential favor.¹¹⁴ Increase and Cotton Mather were especially strong proponents of such histories. In the 1670s Increase called for a "just *History of New-England*, [to] be written, and published to the world." Noting that the books of the Bible were essentially providential histories of Israel, he longed for a new "record of the providential Dispensations of God" that might convey the meaning of New England to the current generation.¹¹⁵ In a 1674 sermon, on the eve of the brutal war with Metacom and the Wampanoag Indians, Increase offered the providential history of New England as a guarantee against dangers in the future:

The Lord will not as yet destroy this place: Our Fathers have built Sanctuaries for his Name therein, and therefore he will not destroy us. The Planting of these Heavens, and the laying the Foundations of this Earth, is one of the Wonders of this last Age. . . . God hath called out a people, even out of all parts of a Nation, which he hath also had a great favour towards, and hath brought them by a mighty hand, and an out-stretched arm, over a greater than the Red Sea, and here hath he planted them, and hath caused them to grow up as it were into a little Nation; And shall we think that all this is to destroy them within forty or fifty years?

The usefulness of historical providentialism was twofold: it could reassure colonists in moments of danger and also deter them from religious or political misbehavior. New England's inhabitants had a duty to both the past and

¹¹³ Samuel Danforth, *A Brief Recognition of New-Englands Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: S.G. and M.F., 1671); Urian Oakes, *New-England Pleaded With, and pressed to consider the things which concern her PEACE* (Cambridge: Samuel Green, 1673), 21, 22, 34; and Thomas Shepard, *Eye-Salve; or, A Watch-Word from our Lord Jesus Christ unto his Church, Especially those within the Colony of the Massachusetts in New-England* (Cambridge: Samuel Green, 1673), 26.

¹¹⁴ See, for instance, Oakes, 23; and Shepard, 16.

¹¹⁵ Increase Mather, *A Brief History of the Warr with the Indians in New-England* (Boston: John Foster, 1676), [iv], [iii].

the future: If they could preserve the unbroken history of this “little Nation,” they would receive God’s ongoing support and secure even greater blessings in the years ahead.¹¹⁶

Were these providential arguments effective? In retrospect, they hardly stemmed the tide of declension or enabled Congregationalism to vanquish its challengers. When the General Court of Massachusetts finally got around to commissioning an official history of New England in 1682, they compensated the author, William Hubbard, but allowed his account – a solid piece of historical providentialism, though perhaps a little deficient in its abrupt ending – to languish in manuscript until the nineteenth century. The effect of these arguments may have been more pronounced in the long term, however. By the 1690s, the emphases of historical providentialism were well established, and the proponents of this approach to New England’s providential meaning could look back across three decades of sermons and histories for evidence of an apparent unity to New England’s history and a distinctiveness to its purpose. That this record of unity and distinctiveness was largely an invention, and diverted attention from the much more complex and tangled relationship between the American colonists and England, seemed hardly to matter.¹¹⁷

Conclusion: “Magnalia Dei”

In 1702 two histories that emerged from the London presses exemplified the shifts in national providentialism that we have been tracking. From New England came Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana*, a vast compendium of history and biography that claimed to tell the story of God’s extraordinary generosity toward the American colonists. The other work was the celebrated *History of the Rebellion* by Edward Hyde, the Earl of Clarendon, an account of the rise and fall of Oliver Cromwell; it might have been subtitled *Magnalia Dei Anglicana*, had this title not already been taken by a 1647 history of Parliament’s victories. Clarendon, like Mather, was a fervent believer in the existence and influence of divine providence, and he clearly imagined both that the rebellion against Charles I was a punishment for England’s sins and that the restoration of Charles II was a form of national deliverance.¹¹⁸

Clarendon’s work, however, lacked any broader understanding of England’s relationship to God. While he appeared to endorse a judicial providentialism

¹¹⁶ Increase Mather, *The Day of Trouble is Near, Two Sermons Wherein is Shewed what are the Signs of a Day of Trouble Being Near* (Cambridge: Marmaduke Johnson, 1674), 27.

¹¹⁷ William Hubbard, *General History of New England* (1682), in William Thaddeus Harris, ed., *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 2nd ser., 5 and 6 (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1848).

¹¹⁸ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; or, The Ecclesiastical History of New-England, from its First Planting in the Year 1620, unto the Year of our LORD, 1698* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1702); Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, ed. W. Dunn Macray, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888); and John Vicars, *Magnalia Dei Anglicana; or, Englands Parliamentary Chronicle* (London: J. Rothwell, 1646).

in his belief that England's sins had brought on the events of the Civil War, there was little triumphalism in his description of the Restoration or his account of Cromwell's defeats. In part, this stemmed from his own misfortunes. After advising Charles II during his exile in Paris and his return to London, Clarendon fell from favor in the summer of 1667 and was himself returned to exile that November. (Ironically, his relatively sympathetic posture toward the vanquished Puritans contributed to his downfall.) In a further example of the vicissitudes of English history, his completed manuscript reached the public nearly thirty years after his death, during which time James II had been routed by the arrival of William and Mary from Holland, and Clarendon's own granddaughter, Anne, had acceded to the throne.¹¹⁹ Although many eighteenth-century readers praised Clarendon's commitment to writing providential history, especially when compared with the skeptical narratives of Hume and Voltaire, Clarendon's book hardly emphasized a particular divine plan or linked English history with the world's redemption.¹²⁰

Cotton Mather, on the other hand, set out to prove that God had directed the settlement of New England. In the general introduction to his book, he declared his ambition to "write the *wonders* of the CHRISTIAN RELIGION, flying from the Depravations of *Europe*, to the *American Strand*," and to "Report the *Wonderful Displays* of His Infinite Power, Wisdom, Goodness, and Faithfulness, wherewith His Divine Providence hath *Irradiated an Indian wilderness*." Mather certainly lacked Clarendon's skills of organization and narrative, and his text was riddled with exaggerations, prolepses, and contradictions.¹²¹ But Mather established a providential significance for America that was lacking in Clarendon's account of England. God's actions in America had "exceeded all that has been hitherto done for any other Nation"; New England's population had grown so quickly that "no History can match it"; the American colonies had been "spied out" by the "God of Heaven" for "the Seat of such *Evangelical and Ecclesiastical*, and very remarkable Transactions, as require to be made an *history*"; and so on. In spite of the colonies' recent troubles, New England's providential course seemed clear.¹²²

It is tempting to imagine that the people of New England had already broken their imaginative ties with England in 1700, but neither Mather's English readers nor the American colonists themselves would have seen New England as a rival to its colonial parent.¹²³ America was a marginal outpost of a dynamic

¹¹⁹ On Clarendon's downfall and return to historiography, see R. W. Harris, *Clarendon and the English Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983), 359–419; and Richard Ollard, *Clarendon and His Friends* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), 267–346.

¹²⁰ See Chapter 2, note 65 and accompanying text.

¹²¹ For example, the biography of John Eliot's Indian missions in book 3 sits uneasily with the Indian wars detailed in book 7.

¹²² Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, general introduction, [20], 1: 3, 23, 4.

¹²³ For two contrasting views of New England's relationship to England at this point, see Philip S. Haffenden, *New England in the English Nation, 1689–1713* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 38–71; and John Canup, *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of an American Identity in Colonial New England* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 198–235.

empire, and the return of political stability after the Glorious Revolution inclined Mather and other American observers to recall that England as well as America had received God's protection. (Mather insisted, though, that New England had "received the *Matchless Favours* of God, even beyond the rest of the *English Nation*.")¹²⁴ In his correspondence with his many English friends and his membership of the Royal Society, Mather demonstrated the strong and amiable links between the colonies and the mother country at the turn of the century.¹²⁵ Historical providentialism – the idea that America had a special destiny in the divine plan for the world's redemption – was not yet an authentic nationalism, or a way of wrenching the American colonies out of an Atlantic world that was dominated by England.

Instead, historical providentialism performed two important tasks in America: it assuaged anxiety about the continuing difficulties of maintaining the American colonies, and it chided the younger generation for their moral declension and for threatening America's divinely underwritten future. For Cotton Mather and other New Englanders who occasionally wrote for an English audience, this rhetoric could also establish the importance of the American colonies and distinguish New England from Virginia, New York, and Pennsylvania, or the English plantations in the Caribbean. In the process of courting these audiences, the proponents of historical providentialism in New England had found a way to escape from the vicissitudes of England's problematic seventeenth century. By 1700 New Englanders had largely disowned the fervent efforts of the first generations of American colonists to plot a shared, Atlantic providential history in the decades before 1660.

National providentialism was not an intellectual framework to guide believers in England or America through every decision in their lives, or to manage every political crisis that might occur. When this language was deployed in its apocalyptic form, as in the English Civil War, it could create more problems than it solved. In New England, the question of the colonies' providential purpose was raised principally by three factors: the relationship between America and England; the role of nonwhites living in proximity to the English settlements; and the idea of societal decline, particularly in the context of a new generation that failed to grasp the colonies' higher purpose since their founding. The interest of New England colonists in national providentialism may have had as much to do with the pressures generated by these three factors, as with any inherent belief in an "errand" or "mission" enjoined by God.

By 1700 the colonists of New England had developed a way of thinking about America as both providentially important and, in some important respects, different from Europe. The irony of this achievement was that it resulted not from any innate exceptionalism but from a prolonged and unsuccessful attempt to

¹²⁴ Mather, *A Pillar of Gratitude; or, A Brief Recapitulation of the Matchless Favours, with which the God of Heaven hath obliged the Hearty Praises of his New-English Israel* (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen, 1700), 30, 21.

¹²⁵ On Mather's engagement with English and European scientific debates, see Winship, 93–110.

bind the providential purpose of the American colonies to the recent history of England. Historical providentialism had hardly come to monopolize the ways in which New England colonists imagined their relationship to God; moreover, the other forms of national providentialism, the judicial and apocalyptic frameworks we noted earlier, continued to circulate throughout the Atlantic world, in spite of the caution urged by the providential quietism of Restoration England. But the successors of Edward Johnson had established a distinct and important means of narrating New England's history. Omitting the crucial, English dimension of that narrative, they bound both the colonists and God to an endless amplification of New England's progress and achievements.

“Empires Are Mortal”

The Origins of Providential Separatism, 1756–1775

On May 20, 1766, the students and faculty of the College of Philadelphia gathered for the annual commencement ceremony. Their ranks were swelled by a large number of the city’s residents, attracted not by the usual academic exercises but by the results of a competition that had aroused interest locally and throughout the colonies. At the height of the Stamp Act crisis, a British member of Parliament, John Sargent, presented a gold medal to the college to be awarded for “the best essay on the reciprocal advantages of a perpetual union between Great-Britain and her colonies.” Sargent, a London merchant, had commercial as well as altruistic motives for promoting “perpetual union”; however, his competition coincided serendipitously with the resolution of the political crisis, giving a festive air to the proceedings. On the morning of May 19, Dorset ship captain Thomas Wise had been toasted in Philadelphia’s coffeehouses for bringing the first confirmed report of the repeal of the Stamp Act. The city’s residents quickly declared that May 20, commencement day, would also be marked by the illumination of the city, the firing of cannons, and the drinking of toasts to the king and to the union of Britain and its colonies.¹

On the afternoon of the 20th, a little before “many barrels of beer” were distributed among Philadelphia’s populace, the gold medal was presented to John Morgan, a professor at the college and also a fellow of the Royal Society.² In keeping with Sargent’s challenge, Morgan began by praising the commercial benefits of a union between Britain and America and denied any interest in American independence. But he reserved special enthusiasm for the religious purpose of Britain’s colonies. The success of the American settlements raised

¹ *Four Dissertations on the Reciprocal Advantages of a Perpetual Union between Great-Britain and her American Colonies* (Philadelphia: William and Thomas Bradford, 1766). On Wise’s reception in Philadelphia, see *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, May 22, 1766, 2.

² The only biography of John Morgan is Whitfield J. Bell Jr., *John Morgan: Continental Doctor* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965); Bell discusses Morgan’s winning essay at 165–67.

the “glorious prospect” of “extending the Gospel in its purity, throughout the vast benighted regions of the western world.” Morgan’s rousing conclusion identified Britain as “an happy instrument in the hands of Heaven, of bearing the tidings of the Gospel to one of the darkest corners of the globe, to nations, who had long sat in darkness and the shadow of death.” As if to impress on his audience the ultimate significance of Britain’s conduct, he suggested that if the “glad tidings” were carried “further still, even to the utmost ends of the earth,” they might “hasten, if I may so speak, that glorious period, when ‘righteousness shall overflow the earth as the waters cover the seas.’” When Americans looked beyond the turbulent debates of 1765 and 1766, they would recognize that Britain was not only spreading Christianity but fulfilling the prophecies of the Bible.³

Morgan’s colleague on the podium that day was William Smith, an Anglican minister and provost of the College of Philadelphia. Smith was born in Aberdeen in 1727 and had moved to America in the early 1750s, taking up the cause of colonial education and sporadically journeying back to Britain in search of funds and support for the college.⁴ Both Smith and Morgan exemplified the vitality of an Atlantic religious and intellectual culture. Morgan, like Cotton Mather, corresponded with the Royal Society in London, while Smith was well acquainted with the archbishop of Canterbury. Both men combined their praise for Britain with a sense that America was to be the stage for even greater things: “When I review the history of the world,” declared Smith, “and look on the progress of Knowledge, Freedom, Arts and Science, I cannot but be strongly persuaded that Heaven has yet glorious purposes to serve thro’ *America*.” Morgan and Smith were generous in their assessment of Britain’s role in preserving and transmitting liberty, but each looked upon America as an important element in a broader divine plan.⁵

Their speeches were warmly received by the “great number of persons present” and published in a volume that attracted subscriptions from prominent Philadelphians (including Robert Morris, Benjamin Rush, and John Penn) and favorable reviews in the English press.⁶ Nine years later, however, in the

³ *Four Dissertations*, 29–30.

⁴ Although Smith was an influential and colorful figure in late colonial and early national America, he has attracted relatively little attention from historians. A sanitized account of his life, containing some useful extracts from his works and correspondence, was published by his great grandson: Horace Wemyss Smith, *Life and Correspondence of the Rev. William Smith, D.D.*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: S. A. George & Co., 1879). A more recent (and much more lively) biography is Thomas Firth Jones, *A Pair of Lawn Sleeves* (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1972). Jones makes no mention of the 1766 commencement, but the speeches and ceremonies are described by Wemyss Smith, 1: 393–96.

⁵ *Four Dissertations*, 11.

⁶ One London periodical, describing the contest entries as “sensible, judicious, and spirited,” printed extracts from Morgan’s winning dissertation: *Monthly Review* 36, no. 1 (January 1767): 24–29, at 28.

frenzied months after the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord, both Smith and Morgan were clearly identified with the Patriot side: Smith as the author of a famous sermon that was regarded in Britain and America as a providential defense of the Revolution, Morgan as the coordinator of a network of surgeries and field hospitals for the Continental army. In the interim, their belief that God had a special plan for America gained prominence in the colonies and in Britain, becoming both a proud argument in Patriot propaganda and a prominent anxiety among British observers.

The story of this Philadelphia commencement, and the eventual fate of Smith and Morgan, raises important questions about the state of providential thinking in Britain and America. Given an English reluctance to apply religion to politics in the decades after the Civil War, why did these American speakers cast Britain as “an instrument of Heaven” in 1766? And were these sentiments intelligible to a British audience as well as to colonists? As Britons continued to explore the relationship between providence and history in the eighteenth century, a combination of religious skepticism and imperial success prompted many commentators to revive a more assertive national providentialism in the 1750s and 1760s. This revival, however, was checked by British anxieties and neuroses and eventually derailed by an alarming American challenge. Against the backdrop of imperial mismanagement and the hardening of British policies toward America, Smith and others would recast the historical providentialism of the seventeenth century into a political vision. God had built up the English colonies with a view to making them independent from the mother country, and the promise of an independent America now eclipsed the achievements and potential of Britain.

I. “This Providential Key”: Providence and Public Affairs in Hanoverian Britain

In the aftermath of the Restoration, providential theorists in England decided that political radicalism was a greater danger to the state than impiety. Cromwell and his supporters had used apocalyptic providentialism to overturn England’s established order, and the Anglicans who regained their pulpits in 1660 were determined to discredit this tactic and avert any reprise of these arguments. At the opening of the eighteenth century, however, the Church of England faced a new set of dangers. On one flank, religious skeptics denied the idea that God intervened in the world or rejected the idea of God altogether. To the chagrin of many Anglicans, relatively moderate proponents of “rational religion” like John Locke and John Toland challenged the idea that God controlled human history. Meanwhile, the Church of England looked to defend English religious practice from the supposed errors of Baptists, free-thinkers, Trinitarians, and a host of other rivals. If the political radicals of the 1640s and 1650s had challenged Anglicanism and monarchy with extravagant interpretations of providential intent, it seemed in the eighteenth century

that church and state might be ambushed by a radicalism that denied religion altogether.⁷

Faced with the prospect of religious skepticism or dissent, Anglicans sought once again to affirm that God controlled everything that happened on earth, and that he directed the course of English history in particular. National providentialism also allowed ministers to argue against the disestablishment of the Church of England. If God favored nations and their national churches, he could not look kindly on a country that either embraced skepticism or encouraged a marketplace of religious ideas. Ironically, Anglicans received support for this revival of providentialism from an unlikely quarter: the nonconformists themselves. Anglican ministers maintained that nonconformism and atheism were virtually indistinguishable and that religious skeptics were in league with Baptists, Quakers, and even Presbyterians to overthrow the happy balance between church and state in England. This distortion of the truth spurred many nonconformists (who shared much more with Anglicanism than skepticism) to treat providentialism as a common ground between dissenters and the religious establishment, and to bring this eighteenth-century movement for a revived national providentialism into the bustling and expanding denominations that stood outside the established church. The rivalry between Anglicanism and nonconformism encouraged both sides to prove their providentialist credentials and led to an inadvertent consensus in England around the legibility of divine involvement in national affairs.⁸

⁷ For an overview of the development of “rational religion” in Britain in this period, see Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 96–129. For a contrasting view of the vitality of Anglicanism and the ancien regime of church and state in England, see J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832: Religion, Society and Politics during the Ancien Regime*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). A significant obstacle to scholarly enquiry in this area is the imputation of Whiggishness and contemporary political bias on the part of the various interpreters. Clark, for example, has arrayed his work on an Anglican stability and continuity through the “long” eighteenth century against the efforts of left-leaning historians (like Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson) to collapse a “short” eighteenth century into either the “English Revolution” of the 1640s/1650s, or the “Industrial Revolution” of the nineteenth century. For a fuller elaboration of his argument, see Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion: State and Society in England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Porter, meanwhile, contends that Clark and other “neo-conservative historians” have “denied by silence an Anglo-Enlightenment” (Porter, 5). Porter, at least, offers the helpful suggestion that Clark’s enormously detailed interpretation demonstrates “the intensity of ideological conflict” during this period. The idea of a “conservative Enlightenment” within Anglicanism that might nuance these conflicting interpretations is found in J. G. A. Pocock, “Clergy and Commerce: The Conservative Enlightenment in England,” in Raffaele Ajello et al., eds., *L’età dei Lumi. Studi storici sul Settecento europeo in onore di Franco Venturi*, 2 vols. (Naples: Jovene Editore, 1985), 1: 525–62; and B. W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

⁸ Note Clark’s assertion that, even as “rationalists” argued against the existence of miracles, this “left largely intact a widespread belief in the actions of Providence.” *English Society*, 30.

The Act of Union in 1707, which folded Scotland into the single territory of Britain, also contributed to a resurgence of providential thinking. Scotland brought a Presbyterian religious culture that had been largely insulated from the providential quietism of post-Restoration England. Moreover, given the lukewarm feelings of many Britons toward the new nation, providentialism offered ministers and orators a powerful means of defining a British, Protestant cause against European enemies – particularly Catholic France.⁹ Even the “enlightened” intellectual elites of Britain’s principal cities – London and Edinburgh – were willing to apply providential logic to contemporary history and politics. Respectable intellectual opinion was far removed from the arguments of Hume or Voltaire that the best way to understand human experience was on its own terms, or that history might be more effectively written within the frameworks of human agency and blind chance. For religious and intellectual elites, providentialism was no longer a means of legitimizing political radicalism, as it had been during the 1640s and 1650s. Instead, it became a means of deterring skepticism and philosophical experimentation in the eighteenth century. Ordinary Britons, in turn, embraced the resurgence of national providentialism as it seemed to vouchsafe the nation’s well-being and its relations with its neighbors in Europe. By 1750 or so, these shifting alliances and priorities had allowed national providentialism to recover its relevance to British political life.¹⁰

Two works from the 1760s and 1770s offer a useful snapshot of British providential thinking on the eve of the American Revolution: Thomas Hunter’s *Moral Discourses on Providence* (1774) and Richard Price’s *Four Dissertations* (1768). Each earned praise from the London press and circulated widely. Although there were obvious differences of emphasis between Anglicans and dissenters on many issues, both Hunter (an Anglican) and Price (a nonconformist) seemed to be in agreement on providentialism. These authors exemplified a body of providential thinking that informed not only sermons but political debates, journalism, tracts on empire and the rhetoric of the Hanoverian court. Providential thinking could be expressed in more specialized “dissertations” or in Hunter’s two heavy volumes, but neither was it especially complex in

⁹ On the importance of anti-Catholicism in forging a British nationalism, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 5–6, 11–54; and Colin Haydon, “‘I love my King and my Country, but a Roman Catholic I hate’: Anti-Catholicism, Xenophobia and National Identity in Eighteenth-Century England,” in Tony Claydon and Ian McBride, eds., *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, c. 1650–c. 1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 33–52. On the relationship between Scottish Presbyterianism, providentialism, and nationalism, see David Allan, “Protestantism, Presbyterianism and National Identity in Eighteenth-Century Scottish History,” in *ibid.*, 182–205.

¹⁰ In his overview of religion and “enlightenment” in eighteenth-century Britain, Jeremy Black notes both that the populace at large endorsed the idea of providentialism and that even the proponents of “rational” thinking among the intellectual elites tended to use this thinking to justify or defend religion, rather than to undermine it. Black, *Eighteenth-Century Britain, 1688–1783* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), 125–59.

its basic outline nor was it confined solely to those who made religion their profession.¹¹

Hunter and Price set out to challenge the “pride of skepticism” that was evident in the writing of Locke, Toland, Hume, and other thinkers. Hunter was particularly vexed by the proponents of “rational” religion who tried to have it both ways: “Of all the monsters . . . there is not one perhaps that shocks more both for its novelty, absurdity and impiety, than that of those who admit the existence of God, yet deny his Providence.”¹² Price directed a similar critique at David Hume, whose *Natural History of Religion* was shot through with skepticism about providential intervention in human affairs. In response to those critics who contrasted “rational” thinking with “superstitious” providentialism, Price and Hunter laid down a careful framework for divine involvement in history. First, they argued that God controlled everything that happened on earth. Second, they suggested that nations and empires prospered or declined according to God’s will. Third, they maintained that the process by which nations advanced or decayed was governed by their political and moral conduct in the eyes of God; nations that conducted themselves with rectitude and piety could expect God’s favor, whereas those lacking these prerequisites would be humbled or even destroyed.

Because these rules formed a template for human behavior that was more reliable than any scientific hypothesis, Hunter and Price were shocked that “rationalists” and atheists advocated the replacement of providential logic with a dangerous skepticism. Strikingly, Hunter suggested that societies in the classical period may have been more attentive to providence than the nations of contemporary Europe, prompting an extraordinary assertion: “The truth is, and must not be dissembled, that the antient pagan has generally more religion than the modern and the christian.” Although the “singular interpositions of Providence” engaged both the “attention and the pen” of pagan historians, modern writers had apparently forgotten the need to record God’s visitations and judgments in contemporary history. By this understanding, one could see that the fall of the classical empires was caused not by polytheism but by the ancients’ eventual disregard of their own form of providentialism – an argument made

¹¹ Richard Price, *Four Dissertations* (London: A. Millar and T. Cadell, 1768); and Thomas Hunter, *Moral Discourses on Providence and other Important Subjects*, 2 vols. (London: T. Cadell, 1774). For favorable reviews, see *Monthly Review* 36, no. 1 (January 1767): 24–29 (Price); and 52, no. 2 (February 1775): 133–39 (Hunter). Hunter’s book boasted a subscription list of more than 900 (featuring MPs, lawyers, doctors, academics, and even the archbishop of Canterbury) and moved into a second edition some two years after its original publication.

¹² Hunter, 1: 1–2. See also the attack on Hume in Price, 359–439. For other contemporary attacks on Hume’s argument that religious themes should be excluded from historiography, see *Monthly Review* 16, no. 1 (January 1757): 50; and *London Magazine* 42, no. 5 (May 1773): 225–27. Price, unlike many of Hume’s critics, maintained a cordial relationship and even regretted the harsh edge to some of the criticisms of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* contained in the fourth of his dissertations. Note the correspondence of March 1767 between Hume and Price in W. Bernard Peach and D. O. Thomas, eds., *The Correspondence of Richard Price*, 3 vols. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983), 1: 45–47.

not only by Hunter but by Edward Wortley Montague, author of *Reflections on the Rise and Fall of Ancient Republics* (1759), and other historians.¹³

The *Monthly Review* of London heaped praise on Price's book in 1767, noting that his "subject is treated with accuracy and precision" and that his assertions "strike the mind so strongly with conviction." The *Review* offered equal praise to Hunter in 1774, repeating his call for a resurgence of "*Pagan principles*" inasmuch as these might lead to a more vigorous sense of providentialism.¹⁴ In spite of these plaudits, there were obvious problems in the theories of Hunter and Price that complicated their appeals for a providential perspective. One seemed particularly corrosive to these theorists' desire to present providence as rational and dependable. What happened if justice was *not* done in the case of an individual or a nation deserving of divine reward or punishment? For individuals, at least, one could defer to heaven or hell in glossing this problem. If a sinful man appeared to prosper on earth, he would presumably get his comeuppance after his death. Hunter was not entirely happy with this line of thinking, because it restricted the capacity of providential commentators to predict what might happen in this life, but this limited view of personal providentialism was widely accepted.¹⁵ The *London Magazine*, in an article "On the Inconsistency of Our Desires" published in 1773, recommended that an individual develop "a certain moderation and equity in his claims upon Providence," and "consider this world as a great mart of commerce, where Fortune exposes to our view various commodities, riches, ease, tranquillity, fame, integrity, knowledge." Just as one would not "expect to preserve oranges through an English winter," so one should be reasonable in one's demands of God before the final reckoning of the providential account after death.¹⁶

Could one take the same view of nations? Numerous British and American sermons and tracts argued to the contrary, insisting that the national and personal forms of providentialism diverged in one crucial respect: nations, unlike individuals, did not go to heaven, and they received the measure of divine reward or punishment in human history. George Fothergill, in a sermon delivered in Oxford on the first fast day of the Seven Years' War, noted that:

Personal Wickedness may, it is true, and often does, in present Appearance, escape His Vengeance; because Personal Wickedness may, and most certainly will, receive its deserved Wages in another State. But this cannot be the Case of National Impiety. Nations cannot be punish'd, because They will not as Nations subsist, in another World.

¹³ Hunter, 1: 59. Montague's affirmation of Polybius as a historian of providentialism is quoted in *Scots Magazine* (Edinburgh) 21, no. 3 (March 1759): 167–68.

¹⁴ *Monthly Review* 36, no. 1 (January 1767): 51; and 52, no. 2 (February 1775): 135.

¹⁵ Hunter, by contrast, advanced the odd argument that even those sinners who seemed to be happy on earth were, in fact, unhappy – they just didn't realize it. Hunter, 1: 226–27.

¹⁶ "On the Inconsistency of our Desires," *London Magazine* 42, appendix (December 1773): 646. For examples of the argument that believers should defer their expectations of reward or punishment until they reached heaven, see Hunter 1: 201; and Philip Yonge, *A Sermon, Preached before the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, in the Abby-Church, Westminster, on Friday, February 13, 1761* (London: John Whiston and Benjamin White, 1761), 13.

And therefore, Those of them, which will not glorify GOD by a willing Compliance with His repeated Admonitions till the Measure of their Iniquities is fill'd up, shall *then* most assuredly, however unwillingly, glorify Him by their exemplary Destruction.¹⁷

This was, in many respects, a flimsy proposition. Because nations were simply an aggregation of individuals, surely the punishment for injudicious state policies or immoral actions abroad might be visited on each guilty Briton at the hour of their death? But Fothergill's formulation of providential justice – in which personal providentialism might appear inchoate on earth, but national providentialism was always complete – recurred so often in Britain and America that it became an orthodoxy.

While many historians have argued that providentialism was incompatible with “Enlightenment,” these differences in thinking about God's handling of individuals and of nations suggest a more subtle relationship between the two. Advocates of “rational” religion and religious toleration argued that the state should be restrained from intervening in matters of individual belief and conscience, and providential theorists followed this lead in affirming that an individual's fate could not be established from the limited facts and events of the temporal world. The excesses of early modern personal providentialism – in which all manner of coincidences or natural phenomena (shipwrecks, fires, diseases) could be ascribed to God – were checked by a new emphasis on the incompleteness of human knowledge. This restraint on personal providentialism was balanced by an insistence on the role of providence in shaping the affairs of state and the course of the nation's history. Politicians, historians, and clergymen might therefore call upon a national providentialism that seemed neither irrational nor especially intrusive in the lives of individual Britons. A providential compromise sacrificed “superstitious” interpretations of God's will in the lives of individuals, thereby preserving the idea of divine control over the broader course of history.¹⁸

This refigured understanding of national providentialism encouraged Britons to see reason and justice in the pattern of world events. “Examine the history of France, Spain or Britain with this providential key in your hand,” urged Thomas

¹⁷ George Fothergill, *The Proper Improvement of Divine Judgments, A Sermon Preached before the Mayor and Corporation at St. Martin's in Oxford on Friday, February 6, 1756* (Oxford: Richard Clements, 1756), 22.

¹⁸ Thus we might concur with Alexandra Walsham's suggestion that personal providentialism “began very gradually to retreat to the edges of the intellectual mainstream” after the 1650s without suggesting that national providentialism in Britain followed the same course. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 333. A tendency to collapse the distinction between personal and national providentialism may also explain the relative exclusion of providence from recent intellectual histories of late eighteenth-century America. See, for example, Gordon Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (1982): 401–41, especially 411–20. Wood, 420, states simply that a putative eighteenth-century shift from searching the “concealed or partially revealed will of God” to understanding “the concealed or partially exposed wills of human beings” was, “in a nutshell, what being enlightened was all about.”

Hunter in 1774. "It will give you a better insight into the causes of the rise and decline, the prosperity or distress, as founded in the morals of each nation, than the speculations, the comments and bold conjectures of the most sharp-sighted politician, or statesman, can afford you."¹⁹ Behind this confidence, providential theorists realized that history did not always make sense in these terms. The challenge was to explain the awkward moments. Perhaps, argued Richard Price, God occasionally used adversity to school a nation, to toughen its people for greater challenges ahead. Or perhaps there was a lag between a nation's actions and God's reciprocation.²⁰ Thomas Hunter stressed that even national providentialism was not completely legible within the lifetime of a human being and that historians would be left to capture the symmetry of providential justice over centuries of national development. In the meantime, to judge God's overarching intentions from a partial perspective would be "to take the night from the day."²¹

This wariness toward a complete accounting of national providentialism reflected not only an inherent weakness in these interpretive strategies but also the unnerving problem of millenarian enthusiasm. Richard Price, with an eye on the apocalyptic providentialism of the Civil War period, noted that "many persons have been much too free in their judgments on such occasions and, in consequence of this, have done much towards bringing this doctrine into discredit."²² Even in the mid-eighteenth century, London's presses turned out a number of popular pamphlets that mapped current affairs onto Bible prophecy.²³ The challenge for a new generation of responsible interpreters of providence was to seek God's meaning in history without repeating the errors of Oliver Cromwell. Clergymen and historians attempted to follow the course of providence without descending into enthusiasm or invention, to defend the doctrine of national providentialism but to avoid discrediting the idea with rash or subversive readings of Revelation.

Thomas Gibbons, an occasional poet and a friend of Samuel Johnson, grappled with these problems in a 1770 sermon delivered in London. In the midst of the Russo-Turkish War, Gibbons (like many good Protestants) hoped that the Russian advance on Constantinople might "be opening the way for the fulfilment of the Divine Prophecies, and may ere long make a successful descent

¹⁹ Hunter, 1: 77.

²⁰ Price, 129. John Thomas, the bishop of Salisbury, noted in 1758 that Britons might in any case feel "indignant at these delays" in the providential scheme. *A Sermon, Preached before the House of Lords, in the Abbey-Church at Westminster, on Friday, February 17, 1758* (London: John Whiston and Benjamin White, 1758), 14.

²¹ Hunter, 1: 406.

²² Price, 91.

²³ For examples, see the reviews of Theodore Delafaye's *Apocalyptical History* (1759) and Theophilus Lobb's *Letters on the Sacred Predictions* (1761) in *Monthly Review* 20, no. 3 (March 1759): 281; and 25, no. 1 (July 1761): 80. The *Review* pilloried the jejune admonitions of Lobb's book as likely to elicit in readers "that pleasing kind of horror with which children hear and relate frightful stories in the nursery."

upon *Italy*, and humble, and cut short, if not totally vanquish and crush the *Roman See*.” But how could one know for sure?

I only give you my best conjectures. Providence is to be left to fulfil the Divine Prediction; but methinks, as on the one side we should not be too rash and peremptory in the explanations of prophecies that are not yet accomplished, so on the other hand we ought not to be inattentive to the completion of them, or any occurrences in the world that seem to be leading the way to events so glorious to God, and so merciful to his people.²⁴

Providential commentators walked a difficult line between the requirement to respect providential dictates and the need to avoid the “delusions of enthusiasm” outlined by Price.²⁵ While some situations – perhaps like Gibbons’s – might allow an onlooker simply to wait and see how things turned out, other providential signs might require national action. Providential theory placed its adherents in the awkward position of having to observe the dictates of providence but not to invent them, and to gauge one’s actions against a standard that was constantly shifting and often clouded in uncertainty.

One might regard these problems as insurmountable and view the idea of providentialism – even the national providentialism that emerged from the compromise sketched here – as fatally compromised by its own contradictions. What is significant about this period, however, is that ministers, politicians, and journalists in Britain and America continued to think and write in providential terms despite the formidable obstacles to a clear view of God’s purpose. The many problems bound up with establishing providential intention also presented an opportunity to Britons and Americans in this period. The difficulty of declaring any single providential perspective to be definitive allowed for many competing assessments of the relationship between providence and current events. Interpreters were united, though, in the belief that Protestants were obliged both to acknowledge God’s control over nations and to make sense of his purposes in human history. The Enlightenment only confirmed British Protestants in their belief that a responsible and reliable providentialism was within their grasp.

2. “The Indulgence of Heaven”: National Identity in the Seven Years’ War

After the Duke of Cumberland’s conclusive victory over Charles Stuart and his Scottish followers at the Battle of Culloden in 1746, Britain embarked on a period of prosperity and expansion that culminated in the Seven Years’ War with France and Spain. By the war’s conclusion in 1763, Britain had expanded its empire in North America and South Asia, driving the French from Canada

²⁴ Thomas Gibbons, *The State of the World in General, and of Great Britain in particular, as to Religion, and the Aspects of Providence, seriously and impartially considered, in a Sermon Preached at Haberdashers Hall, October 21, 1770* (London: James Buckland & Edward and Charles Dilly, 1770), 22.

²⁵ Price, 67.

and the Ohio Valley and laying the foundation for more than a century of commercial and military supremacy around the world. Given the continued interest of Britons in reading current events against God's intentions, we might expect that this happy moment in British history would produce a glut of providential rejoicing. The historian Linda Colley, in her subtle and sweeping study of British national identity, has indeed argued that Britons saw themselves as a "chosen nation" or a "new Jerusalem" at this moment. A careful survey of British rhetoric suggests a rather different story. While the outcome of the Seven Years' War persuaded many British observers that God was on their side, a variety of factors blunted the conviction either that God had special plans for Britain in history or that God intended Britons to play a role in triggering Christ's return.²⁶

Although providential rhetoric in mid-eighteenth-century Britain appeared in many different places, these ideas were most prominently conveyed in the sermons and declarations issued on days of fasting and thanksgiving during wartime. The Old Testament described numerous instances when the Jews had sought to appease God and to curtail the judgments under which they were suffering, or to praise God for his favors to them in times of adversity. In Britain, the tradition dated back to the sixteenth century and had been widely adopted in the American colonies.²⁷ The king and his advisers enjoyed the

²⁶ Linda Colley's groundbreaking study of British national identity does not make distinctions between national and personal providentialism, or between the three varieties of the former (judicial, apocalyptic, historical) that the present study explores. Colley argues at various points that Britons had a sense of "mission," that they maintained "an apocalyptic interpretation of history," and that they identified their nation with ancient Israel. However, she offers no means to distinguish between these different forms of providential appeal: Colley, 11–54. The most recent collection of essays on this subject – entitled *Protestantism and National Identity* – seeks to clarify Colley's claims but hardly displaces the "chosen nation" motif as a useful explanatory tool for understanding eighteenth-century Britain. The editors of the collection question Colley's descriptive claims but affirm that the idea of an "elect nation" was at least an aspiration for Britons after 1707. Tony Claydon and Ian McBride, "The Trials of the Chosen Peoples: Recent Interpretations of Protestantism and National Identity in Britain and Ireland," in Claydon and McBride, eds., 3–29. Colley reworks a version of national providentialism defined by historian William Haller and discussed in the [previous chapter](#). Haller used the work of John Foxe, and particularly his *Acts and Monuments* chronicling the suffering of Protestants at the hands of Catholics, to claim that England/Britain was an elect nation. Colley argues in *Britons*, 25–28, that the popularity of reprints of John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* in the eighteenth century demonstrated a continued British interest in chosen-nation thinking. Haller himself was reluctant to push his claims beyond the English Civil War. Moreover, in an appendix to *The Elect Nation*, he argued that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century versions of the *Acts and Monuments* tended to diverge significantly from the earlier editions, excluding "the whole account of ecclesiastical and national history" in favor of more sensationalist woodcuts and stories of Protestant persecution from "other times and places." In surveying the later editions to which Colley makes reference, Haller noted "the progressive corruption and vulgarization of the original for the propagation of an increasingly narrow evangelical Protestant piety." William Haller, *The Elect Nation: The Meaning and Relevance of Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 252.

²⁷ On the fast tradition of Hanoverian Britain, see Henry P. Ippel, "Blow the Trumpet, Sanctify the Fast," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 44 (1980–81): 43–60.

authority to declare a fast day or a day of national thanksgiving, and these were observed during the Seven Years' War by every Christian denomination (and even by Britain's small Jewish population). Although there is evidence to suggest that some people adhered more to the letter than the spirit of the fast – gorging on fish and vegetables and merely eschewing meat – British churches were filled with people on these days, and fast sermons were preached to a large audience.²⁸

Perhaps the most ominous providential visitation discussed during the first years of the war was the terrible destruction of Lisbon by an earthquake in 1755. Portugal was a Catholic country with long-standing commercial and political ties to Britain. British observers could view Portugal as justly punished for its Catholicism, or they might tremble for their own fate given God's terrible scourging of an ally. In addition to inspiring a number of earthquake sermons in 1755, Lisbon loomed large in February 1756 on the first fast day of the Seven Years' War. The *London Magazine* noted that these "national calamities" for Portugal were "but the just and deserved judgments and corrections of an offended God, upon the sinful inhabitants of a wicked land." Lest the British readers of this article rest on their laurels, the author begged God to "suffer not Portugal's dreadful calamity to become the fate of England," though "thy Almighty arm may be at present even lifted up against our land."²⁹ The obvious coincidence of the outbreak of war with the devastating earthquake unnerved fast-day preachers. One hoped that Britons would heed the lesson of Lisbon and shed their sins and vices. Another simply transposed the lurid descriptions of Lisbon's devastation to Britain's cities, as if providence had already determined England's defeat.³⁰

Fast-day sermons from the first years of the war held that Lisbon's destruction and the war itself were caused by the aggregate sins and improprieties of the Portuguese and British people. In 1757 John Dupont, an Anglican minister from Aysgarth in Yorkshire, offered "a too true and humiliating Catalogue of those crying and enormous Sins" that threatened the nation: he focused particularly on the evil of intemperance, which he ascribed to "luxury," a broad category of complaint during this period.³¹ Fast sermons tended to gather

²⁸ For accounts of the fasts, see *Scots Magazine* 18, no. 2 (February 1756): 97–100; and *Evening Advertiser* (London), January 19–21, 1758, 3. According to the former, a group of Quaker merchants opened their shops in the midst of a fast day in February 1756, but a crowd of observant passersby "warmly resented" their action and quickly mobilized against them. Quaker leaders consequently expelled the offending merchants from their congregation.

²⁹ "Reflections on the fate of Lisbon," *London Magazine* 25, no. 2 (February 1756): 67–68.

³⁰ Joseph Pitts, *Turning to God, an effectual Way of Escaping threatened Judgments, A Sermon Preach'd in New-Court, February 6, 1756* (London: J. Buckland and E. Dilly, 1756), 22; and William Dodd, *The Nature and Necessity of Fasting, Being the Substance of Two Sermons Preach'd in the Parish Churches of West Ham, Essex, and St. Olave's, Hart-Street, London* (London: E. Dilly, 1756).

³¹ John Dupont, *National Corruption and Depravity the Principal Cause of National Disappointments, in a Sermon Preach'd at Aysgarth, on Friday, the 11th of February 1757* (London: C. Corbett, 1757), 10.

a group of familiar offenses and to insist that the nation's condition would not improve until they had ceased: drunkenness, swearing, Sabbath breaking, infidelity, lying, religious skepticism, and, more generally, "contempt of God's word and ordinances."³² Though one might assume that the outcome of distant battles would depend on the skills of competing armies and generals, or the decisions of the British government, ministers throughout the land told their congregations that Britain's fate hinged on the vices or virtues of the populace at large.

Some ministers enthused over the connection between popular virtue and foreign policy, while others slid into pessimism.³³ Ebenezer Radcliff, preaching in Boston, Lincolnshire, in February 1758, argued that the current crisis – "the Decisive Period of British Power and Liberty" – seemed to indicate that "the Measure of our Iniquities is filled up."³⁴ Francis Blackburne, in two sermons delivered in London, went further still, arguing that there was no hope of "the voluntary concurrence of the body of our people, in any measures of reformation." Having discounted the possibility of imposing "reformation" on the people by use of the "civil power," Blackburne reached the conclusion that "these are the days of the long suffering of God, by which he means to bring all men to the knowledge of the truth, and to an effectual repentance." In the winter of 1757–58, as William Pitt was tasked with engineering a reversal in the nation's military fortunes, Britain's bleak prospects hardly discouraged such resignation.³⁵

The campaigns of 1758 and 1759 were much more successful, and Pitt's gamble on an enormous American invasion force paid off handsomely as nearly 50,000 Redcoats and colonial volunteers overwhelmed New France. By the spring of 1759, Britain's fortunes on the battlefield had improved to such a degree that ministers on the home front offered invigorated assessments of the nation's relationship with God. Alexander Gerard, preaching in Aberdeen on the February fast day, noted that "few nations have been so highly favoured of heaven" as Britain, even after "making all reasonable allowances" for the fact that "each nation is apt to be partial to itself."³⁶ By November of that year, with the British flag flying over the pivotal French fortress at Quebec, the

³² For a catalog of these, see John Edwards, *The safe Retreat from impending Judgments, being the Substance of a Sermon Preached at Leeds, March 12, 1762, Being the Day Appointed by his Majesty for a GENERAL FAST* (London: E. Dilly, 1762), 4.

³³ For an example of the former strategy, see Nathaniel Ball, *True Religion, Loyalty and Union recommended to all Orders of Men; in a Sermon Preached at Pleshey, Feb. 11 1757, Being the Day appointed for a Public Fast on Account of the War with France* (London: J. Buckland, 1757), 9–10.

³⁴ Ebenezer Radcliff, *The Crisis; or, The Decisive Period of British Power and Liberty, Stated and Addressed to Every Rank in the Community, in Two Sermons, Preached in Boston in the County of Lincoln, Feb 17 1758* (London: R. Griffiths, 1758), 4, 16.

³⁵ Francis Blackburne, *Two Sermons Preached on a Fast Day During the Late War with France* (London: J. Bew, 1778), 18–21.

³⁶ Alexander Gerard, *National Blessings an Argument for Reformation, A Sermon, Preached at Aberdeen, November 29, 1759* (Aberdeen: J. Chalmers, 1759), 6.

king felt sufficiently confident about the course of the war to declare a day of national thanksgiving. Robert Gilbert, in a sermon delivered in Northampton entitled "Britain Revived," suggested that his countrymen were living in "the favourite aera in the history of *Great Britain*" and that "happy Britons seem to have taken the cast of *the people of Israel*, when *Solomon* dismissed them from the feast of dedication." The connection between Britain and Israel was widely made in this year, and also featured heavily in the thanksgiving rhetoric surrounding the eventual victory over France and its belated ally, Spain, in 1763.³⁷

The transition from the ominous pessimism of the early fast-day sermons to the joyful identification of Britain with Israel might seem to indicate a wild inconsistency in providential thinking. In fact, these rhetorical extremes were closer together than it might at first appear. The most gloomy sermons in 1757 allowed for the possibility that things might turn around if the public repented of its sins; meanwhile, the thanksgiving sermons of 1759 and after balanced the claim that God had taken up the British cause with a warning that this favor might prove fleeting. Although Britons had "long experienced the gracious providence of God," argued Westminster preacher Joseph Robertson in 1761, they would be severely punished if they "abused the indulgence of heaven."³⁸ For the most part, both the pessimistic and optimistic visions of the Seven Years' War conformed to judicial providentialism: Britain would rise or fall in God's estimation depending not on its glorious history of divine protection or its purported role in the apocalyptic scheme, but on the fluctuating virtues of its leaders and its inhabitants.

Even the identification with Israel carried a warning for Britain. William Warburton, one of the most prominent bishops in the Church of England during this period, had noted in a 1759 sermon that Providence was "now no less watchful, for the preservation of the British nation, than it was of old, for the Jewish." Two years later, he qualified this analogy in a fast sermon. Even the chosen people had forsaken their God, and he had responded by sending them into a calamitous exile. Thus there was a double edge to the example of biblical Israel, and the reasons for caution about Britain's favored status in the present were plentiful: "The conduct of God towards the Israelites, though attended

³⁷ Robert Gilbert, *Britain Revived, and under the smiles of Mercy, summoned to the Work of Praise, a Sermon Delivered at Northampton, on Thursday, Nov. 29, 1759* (London: J. Buckland, n.d. [1759?]), 25–26. Spain had kept out of the war during its early years, in spite of the family ties that linked the French and Spanish monarchies. But the wave of British victories prompted a renewal of the Bourbon alliance in 1761, and Britain formally declared war on Spain in January 1762.

³⁸ For these balanced assessments of Britain's triumph, see (inter alia) Benjamin Wallin, *The Joyful Sacrifice of a Prosperous Nation, A Sermon Preached at the Meeting-House near the Maze-Pond, Southwark, on Thursday, November 29, 1759* (London: Printed for the Author, 1760), 28–29; Edwards, 9; and J. Robertson, *The Subversion of Ancient Kingdoms Considered, A Sermon Preached at St. John's, Westminster, on Friday, February 13, 1761* (London: J. Whiston and B. White, 1761), 19–20.

with some peculiar circumstances, holds up a glass to all nations, in which they may read their own safety, doom or expectation.”³⁹ The identification of Britain as an elect nation might as readily remind Britons of Israel’s providential destruction as of its prosperity.⁴⁰

Strikingly, a number of clergymen denied the idea that Britain had been chosen by God even during the national triumph of 1763. Partly this was out of deference to Britain’s allies, who had helped to defeat France in the land wars on the European continent.⁴¹ Newcastle minister Samuel Lowthion denied Britain’s special status as a point of principle: “Such an appellation we are not authorized to arrogate to ourselves, to the exclusion of other states and kingdoms.”⁴² Thomas Hunter summarized this thinking in his 1774 tract. Britain had not deserved divine favor during the War of Jenkin’s Ear (1739–42), because the British effort had been fueled by chauvinism and military arrogance. On that occasion, God had helped Spain to thwart Britain’s predatory designs, just as he had protected the English from the armada during a moment of Spanish national madness in 1588. Having established these episodes of providential justice, Hunter briskly rejected the idea that God favored any nation on a permanent or exclusive basis: “As God is not confined in his existence and Providence to one short age, or to the limited duration of human life; so is he not the God of one system, or one nation, church, sect or party.”⁴³

³⁹ William Warburton, “A Sermon, Preached at Bristol, November 29, 1759, Being the Day Appointed for a Public Thanksgiving, for Victories Obtained by the British Arms,” in Richard Hurd, ed., *The Works of the Right Reverend William Warburton, Lord Bishop of Gloucester*, 7 vols. (London: John Nichols, 1788), 5: 399–414, at 404–5; and Warburton, *A People’s Prayer for Peace, A Sermon Preached at Northampton, February 13, 1761, The Day Appointed for a General Fast* (London: James Buckland, 1761), 17.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Thomas Bonney, *The Blessings of Peace secured by Piety, Gratitude, and Unanimity, A Sermon Preached at the Parish Church of St Andrew Undershaft, London, May 5, 1763* (London: R. Davis, 1763), 8–9.

⁴¹ Wallin, 18–19; Richard Winter, *An Earnest Exhortation to Persevere in Prayer and Thanksgiving on the Nation’s Account, in a Sermon Preached, Feb 18th, 1759* (London: Edward Dilly, T. Field and J. Buckland, 1759), 28. The fêting of Frederick the Great as an instrument of providence is the more surprising when one considers that Britain’s expedient alliance with Prussia, intended to ensure the security of Hanover, came as an unexpected rebuke to Britain’s traditional ally, Austria. (Austria’s subsequent alliance with France, however, opened up the intellectual possibility of a united front in Europe against Catholicism.)

⁴² S. Lowthion, *The Blessings of Peace, A Sermon Preached in Hanover Square, Newcastle upon Tyne, on the General Thanksgiving Day, (Thursday, May 5, 1763)* (Newcastle: T. Slack, 1763), 5–6.

⁴³ Hunter 1: 87, 354. A more extreme argument, stressing that one could not rely on providential justice for either individuals or nations in temporal history, gained some popularity as Britain’s war efforts experienced setbacks in 1760 and 1761. See the letter published in *London Magazine* 29, no. 10 (October 1760): 543; and the article on “The Horrors of War and its direful Effects” in *London Magazine* 30, no. 5 (May 1761): 251–52. The letter held that, given the ravages of perpetual war, “this whole world is no more in comparison with eternal bliss, than a single sand with the earth’s globe”; the article suggested that it was “blasphemy” that God “should decide the justice of a cause, by assisting one part of mankind to cut the throats of the rest of men.”

Beyond these versions of judicial providentialism, urging moral reformation in moments of despair or warning of hubris in moments of triumph, was there a more assertive British understanding of providence in this period? Perhaps the most striking thing about the rhetoric of the Seven Years' War is the absence of apocalyptic or historical providentialism among British commentators. A number of sermons came close to developing a deeper association between British history and a divine plan, but clergymen largely avoided the identification of a particular mission or purpose for Britain in God's scheme. Some sermons celebrated Britain's glorious past while neglecting to articulate a providential role for the nation.⁴⁴ Others suggested that recent events presaged "some *grand Revolution*" in world affairs or a "shaking of the nations," but they neglected to fix Britain's place in this exciting future.⁴⁵

A handful of authors followed the lead of Edward Johnson and the American proponents of historical providentialism, arguing that God's previous favors to Britain and his current protection suggested a glorious future for the nation. Benjamin Wallin, a Baptist minister, was one; Richard Price, the providential theorist, was another. Wallin and Price reached back to the Reformation, "when our Land was delivered from Popish Tyranny and Darkness," for evidence of God's special care for Britain. Wallin used the "prospect of these Wonders from one Age to another" to argue that Britain's future would be similarly bright.⁴⁶ Price went even further. Insisting that Britain was "the bulwark of the Protestant interest in the world," he projected a vision of global political and religious redemption in which the nation's successes would radiate outward:

The invention of printing follow'd by the reformation and the revival of Literature; the free communication which has been open'd between the different parts of the world, and the late amazing improvements in knowledge of every kind, have remarkably prepared the way for this joyful period. The world is now advancing far beyond its infancy. There are many indications of an approaching general amendment in human affairs. The season fixed by prophecy for the destruction of the *man of sin* cannot be far distant, and the glorious light of *the latter days* seems to be now dawning upon mankind from this happy Island.

Price looked backward and forward from Britain's recent victories, leaping over his peers who fixed Britain's providential favor in the present. Britain, in Price's grandiose scheme, was an integral part of a historical progression that had commenced with the Reformation and would culminate in the millennium.

⁴⁴ See, for example, John Dupont, *Zerah's Defeat; or, The LORD is with us: A Sermon Preached at Aysgarth, on Friday, February 16, 1759, Being the Day Appointed by his Majesty's Proclamation for a General Fast* (York: Caesar Ward for Samuel Stabler, 1759).

⁴⁵ See, for example, John Milner, *Signs of the Times, in Two Discourses Delivered at Peckham in Surrey: On the General Fast, February 11, 1757, Wherein some Grand Events of Scripture Prophecy are Considered and Improved* (London: J. Noon, J. Buckland, R. Griffiths, G. Keith, and J. and S. Johnson, 1757).

⁴⁶ Wallin, 26–27.

Price kept his apocalyptic outcome sufficiently vague, however, to avoid any immediate embarrassment at the hands of history.⁴⁷

The advantages of this rhetoric seem clear. Britons could free themselves from the cyclical scheme of judicial providentialism and fold their expanding imperial visions into a vast redemptive narrative. In moments of anxiety, meanwhile, they would feel reassured by their favored history and their ongoing role in God's plan for humanity. A bold vision of Britain's providential identity would also prove useful in the battle against religious skepticism: Richard Price was confident that his narration of God's role in British history would "extort acknowledgement and praise from the most blind and atheistical." It is worth asking why these instances of historical providentialism were so rare in late Hanoverian Britain; and why – as Britain and its American colonies became estranged – American preachers and orators were more successful in employing this rhetoric. As we have already seen, apocalyptic providentialism foundered in England because of its reckless application to the events of the English Civil War. That same conflict, which had been quietly removed from the bright visions of Benjamin Wallin and Richard Price, confounded eighteenth-century efforts to plot the course of providence through Britain's troubled past.

3. "A Dream in the Night": The Discontinuities of British History

The importance of putting God back into British history was widely acknowledged in the second half of the eighteenth century, both by providential theorists like Thomas Hunter and by journals of opinion like the *Monthly Review*. Hume and Voltaire had explicitly denied the active role of God in national affairs, and Hunter fretted that other historians had slipped into the same erroneous assumption. What was needed, he argued in 1774, was a "history of Providence" that would demonstrate for Britain "a nearer and juster moral connection between effects and causes, than is at present discernible in the vulgar, partial page of history." In recent years, British historians had been gripped by "a studied affectation to exclude the hand of Providence from all the works of nature and revolutions of states." The challenge for those historians, in Hunter's view, was to leapfrog the partiality of specific political affiliations, as well as the tedium of high political history, and to map God's involvement with Britain onto specific events.⁴⁸

Hunter's appeal was entirely compatible with the judicial providentialism that predominated in eighteenth-century Britain. The continuing challenge of the Jacobites before 1746, combined with the regular peril of foreign wars throughout the century, provided ample evidence that God might scourge the nation as readily as he might favor it. Even in moments of triumph, orators

⁴⁷ Richard Price, *Britain's Happiness, and the Proper Improvement of it, Represented in a Sermon, Preach'd at Newington-Green, Middlesex, on Nov. 29 1759* (London: A. Millar and R. Griffiths, 1759), 22, 15, 23.

⁴⁸ See note 13 and Hunter, 1: 85–86, 59–60.

warned Britons to “rejoice with trembling.”⁴⁹ Running against this providential wariness was a tradition of identifying moments in British history as particularly indicative of God’s favor. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 was regularly cited as evidence of God’s special regard for England; the fortuitous discovery of Guy Fawkes’s plot on November 5, 1605, quickly achieved a similar status, and November the Fifth became a day on which Britons celebrated their national deliverance. By a happy coincidence, and with a little finagling of the dates, the arrival of William and Mary in Britain in 1688 was also held to have taken place on that day. Sermons and addresses on the “double deliverance” were a commonplace in eighteenth-century Britain, along with bell ringing, bonfires, and formal public celebration.⁵⁰

Providential theory held that Britons had not only a right but a duty to record such favors and to ponder their meaning. Did the “double deliverance” imply that God’s support was cumulative and ongoing? According to the judicial view of providence, one might interpret the events of 1605 and 1688 as rewards to a nation that, at those moments at least, had earned God’s favor. Behind Thomas Hunter’s interest in a providential history of Britain lay a grander prize: could these moments be linked in an unbroken narrative of divine favor, of the kind that Benjamin Wallin and Richard Price had imagined? While many of Hunter’s contemporaries produced histories and sermons that successfully glossed the caesuras of the eighteenth century, Britons who examined their nation’s history since the Reformation struggled to make sense of the period between the first and second episodes of the “double deliverance”: the problematic decades that encompassed the battle between Charles I and Parliament, the regicide and the brief span of the Commonwealth, and the renewed anxieties over Stuart rule that compromised the Restoration. There were certainly other difficulties in determining a providential trajectory for Britain – where this trajectory should begin, for one thing – but it was the persistent problem of this period between James I’s death and William III’s succession that stymied a historical providentialism for Britain.

The memory of the English Civil War was kept alive in various ways in eighteenth-century Britain. Beyond the formal histories that continued to issue from the presses, newspapers and journals offered biographical sketches of the

⁴⁹ For a summary of the problems caused by the awkward and inchoate successions following 1688, see Colley, 46–48, 71–85; and Black, 231–55. For a representative example of the conservatism of British providential commentators, see Thomas Gibbons, *The Deliverance and Triumph of Great Britain, in a Thanksgiving Sermon for the Success of His Majesty’s Arms* (London: J. Oswald, 1746), 19–20; and John Burton, “The moral Uses of Fasting, considered and applied, A Sermon Preached before the University of Oxford, at St. Mary’s, on March 12, 1762,” in Burton, *Occasional Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford, on Publick Days Appointed for Fasts and Thanksgivings*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1764), 1: 205–44, at 209. Gibbons, 19, offered the injunction to “rejoice with trembling.”

⁵⁰ See David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989); and Colley, 19–20.

protagonists, fresh accounts of the regicide and the Long Parliament, and even genealogical tables that could be unfolded to reveal the roots and branches of the Cromwell family tree. The Church of England, meanwhile, commemorated the execution of Charles I as a formal fast day each January 30th, requiring churches throughout the nation to conduct services and to lay a black cloth on their altars in memory of the royal “martyr.” Fast-day sermons were preached before the House of Lords and the House of Commons, and the nation’s most prominent bishops and scholars ruminated upon the significance of the regicide.⁵¹

Although these sermons were undoubtedly less popular during the reign of George III than they had been during the Restoration, they persisted well into the nineteenth century. (The commemoration of Charles’s “martyrdom” was formally abolished in 1858.)⁵² The Civil War itself continued to spark a great deal of controversy in late Hanoverian Britain. Every January, newspapers and magazines debated not only the meaning of what had occurred but also the propriety of commemorating these events. Some commentators viewed the conflict of the 1640s as an “eternal stain” that had been “entailed” on Britain by Parliament and Cromwell. Others simply noted the deleterious effects of the anniversary on national unity in the present and lamented the opportunities it offered for “bigots” of every persuasion to distort contemporary political debates.⁵³

The meaning of the Civil War for most Britons was bound up with a struggle between king and Parliament that spanned the entire seventeenth century. Charles I had overstepped the bounds of his authority in dismissing Parliament and remaking the Church of England, but Parliament and, eventually, Cromwell had also erred both in killing the king and in repeating some of Charles’s mistakes during the Commonwealth period. The battle between the monarch and Parliament continued during the Restoration and was finally resolved only by the removal of James II and the arrival of William and Mary in 1688. The lesson of the Civil War, for most Britons, was that a compromise between the executive and legislature was crucial for Britain’s stability. Parliament would learn from the chaos of the 1650s that it could not rule without a sovereign; the sovereign, meanwhile, could learn from the fates of Charles I and James II that he or she could not rule without Parliament. In providential terms, this meant that neither the king nor Parliament could claim to be doing God’s work by

⁵¹ For accounts of this tradition and the commemorative ceremonies, see Helen W. Randall, “The Rise and Fall of a Martyrology: Sermons on Charles I,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1947): 135–67; and Byron S. Stewart, “The Cult of the Royal Martyr,” *Church History* 38, no. 2 (1969): 175–87.

⁵² In the 1750s and 1760s, commentators occasionally argued that the tradition of commemorating January 30th was “worn out.” See, for example, *Scots Magazine* 18, no. 2 (February 1756): 97–100.

⁵³ *Gazetteer*, no. 12,766, January 30, 1770, 4; *London Magazine* 37, no. 12 (December 1768): 623–24; and *London Magazine* 40, no. 1 (January 1771): 35–37.

defying the other. Divine-right arguments for monarchical infallibility were as perverse as the claim that the regicide enjoyed God's approval.

The return of political instability in the 1770s brought the issues of the Civil War and national memory to the fore once again. With the colonists in America declaring Cromwell to be a hero and a role model, or at least arguing for the right to resist tyranny on the basis of the events of the 1640s, many Britons were forced to reconsider the outcome and meaning of the English Revolution. Meanwhile, the challenge of Britain's own political radicals, including suspected republicans like John Wilkes, persuaded some clergymen and politicians that a new generation of radical Commonwealthmen had formed a fifth column within the state.⁵⁴ (Wilkes, with typical panache, told Parliament that he believed January 30th should be kept "not as a *fast*, but a *feast* day.")⁵⁵ As the *London Magazine* suggested in 1771, the majority of Britons would rather not reopen the wounds of the Civil War; it seemed that the appeal of discussing the regicide and Cromwell was limited to those radical republicans or High Anglicans who sought to disrupt the happy balance of the Glorious Revolution. However, the institution of January 30th forced the memory of the Civil War back into the public eye on an annual basis, raising the prospect of debate and dispute over specific interpretations that might alienate both extremists and the majority of Britons.

The most prominent of these interpretations was offered in 1772 by Thomas Nowell, the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford and the guest speaker at the January 30th commemoration in the House of Commons. Before the assembled members of Parliament, Nowell plunged into the High Church interpretation of the "martyrdom," arguing that "all authority, dominion and power" were due to "those, whom [God's] Providence has delegated to be his representatives upon earth." Nowell's address was directed against the many critics who had argued since 1688 that, in fact, God's providential appointment of kings was entirely conditional on their willingness to rule justly; if they broke this covenant, God might remove them either directly (through disease or sudden death) or through human instruments like Oliver Cromwell. This "divine right of providence" was intended both to guarantee God's involvement in history and to lay down a warning to rulers that their authority was circumscribed. For conservative thinkers like Nowell, however, this argument smacked of the same hubris and impiety as the apocalyptic providentialism of Cromwell and his allies. During the Civil War, Nowell argued in 1772, "men of corrupt hearts, and heated imaginations" had come to believe that they

⁵⁴ On the survival of Cromwellian imagery into the eighteenth century in Britain and America, see Alfred F. Young, "English Plebeian Culture and Eighteenth Century American Radicalism," in Margaret Jacob and James Jacob, eds., *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), 185–212.

⁵⁵ Wilkes's remark, which was made as the Commons decided on a preacher to preside over the January 30th commemoration in 1775, was reported in *Craftsman* (London), January 28, 1775, 4.

were “the peculiar favourites of Heaven,” thus holding “the delusions of their own distempered brain to be the inspirations of the Deity.” The lesson from this terrible moment in English history, he concluded, was that Britons should avoid looking for “signs and wonders” from God and should instead treat the divine right of kings as an irrevocable providential injunction.⁵⁶

This reactionary address led to a contretemps that was by turns comic and caustic. It appears that very few MPs actually made the short journey to St. Margaret’s Church to hear the sermon, and those who did (led by Sir William Dolben, a prominent Tory) voted the customary thanks of the House for Nowell’s performance. When the sermon was published the following month, however, those MPs who had been absent on the day were appalled to discover not only that Nowell had defended divine right but that the half-empty House had thanked him for doing so. The *Parliamentary Register*, dryly noting that the House had “inadvertently thanked” Nowell, chronicled the attempts of MPs to retract this vote. Thomas Townshend, a Surrey MP who had been a treasury lord in Rockingham’s recent ministry, led the attack on Nowell, arguing that “the sermon ought to be burnt by the common hangman.” (Edward Gibbon, a notoriously taciturn parliamentary onlooker, described the episode in his diary as “very odd” and remarked at this point that “Nowell’s bookseller is much obliged to the right hon. Tommy Townshend.”) Other MPs followed Townshend’s lead, and Dolben received no support from his colleagues who had actually witnessed the sermon’s delivery. The anger over Nowell’s address even prompted a group of MPs to introduce a bill that would abolish the January 30th commemoration.⁵⁷

Townshend and his allies were successful in overturning the original vote of thanks, but the House voted narrowly to keep the anniversary of the “martyrdom” on the religious calendar. The journalist William Cobbett, summarizing the outcome in his *Parliamentary History*, reprinted Samuel Johnson’s observation that to abolish the annual commemoration would “be declaring it was wrong to establish it.” The final word in the argument, though, went to Sir Thomas Cave MP, who offered the Commons an anecdote featuring Queen

⁵⁶ Thomas Nowell, *A Sermon, Preached before the Honourable House of Commons, at St. Margaret’s, Westminster, on Thursday, January XXX, 1772* (London: Henry Hughes, 1772), 10, 11–12. Accounts of a new “divine right of providence,” which challenged the old understanding of absolute submission to the monarch, are offered by Colley, 47–48; Gerald M. Straka, *Anglican Reaction to the Revolution of 1688* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1962), 65–79; and John Spurr, “‘Virtue, Religion and Government’: The Anglican Uses of Providence,” in Tim Harris, Paul Seaward, and Mark Goldie, eds., *The Politics of Religion in Restoration England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 29–47. An important dissent from this view, which holds instead that the “divine right of providence” had more in common with passive obedience and the other tenets of Filmerian thought than with putatively Lockean contractualism, is offered by Clark, *English Society*, especially 83–104.

⁵⁷ The fullest account of the episode, including extracts from Gibbon’s diary, is in [William Cobbett and T. C. Hansard], *The Parliamentary History of England, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, 36 vols. (London: T. C. Hansard, 1813), 17: 312–19 (February 21–March 2, 1772). See also *Scots Magazine* 34, no. 3 (March 1772): 131–32.

Caroline, the wife of George II. Cave narrated the queen's discussion with an artist who had just completed a series of paintings of every British king and queen. She was astonished to see Oliver Cromwell's portrait between Charles I and Charles II and asked the painter if he intended Cromwell to be treated as a king. The artist said no, "to be sure he was no king, but that it was a good memento to all kings to have an Oliver Cromwell by the side of them." Finding a place for Cromwell in British national memory was necessary but extremely discomfiting. Just as the Commons had deemed it acceptable to withdraw its thanks to Nowell but unacceptable to abolish the January 30th commemoration, so those who sought to establish a history of Britain's relationship with God struggled to capture the meaning of Cromwell's challenge with the simple elegance of Thomas Cave's anecdote.⁵⁸

If one looks at the entire output of January 30th sermons from the 1750s to the 1780s, it seems clear that the Whig view – that the seventeenth century demonstrated the need for balance between Parliament and the sovereign – was in the ascendant. Whigs even pulled off the clever trick of making allegiance to George II and George III seem dependent on a renunciation of divine right: to be a loyal subject of the Hanoverian dynasty required one to accept the awkward process by which the Stuart pretenders had been excluded. Discerning a providential logic in the pattern of seventeenth-century history proved a harder task for sermonizers on all sides. Edmund Law, bishop of Carlisle, argued in 1771 that the struggle for power demonstrated both the control of God over the world's events and the sinfulness of Britain throughout the seventeenth century.⁵⁹ John Hinchliffe, the bishop of Peterborough, told the House of Lords on January 30, 1773, that the idea of a Commonwealth "was ever found impracticable" in British history and that the nation eventually returned to monarchy only after it had "grown weary of its miseries."⁶⁰ At the January 30th commemoration in 1775, Brownlow North, bishop of Worcester, described the task of remembering the regicide and the surrounding events as "mortifying and humiliating."⁶¹ The common theme in these sermons was the necessity of remembering these events, difficult though it might be, as a reminder that providence had punished Britain in the past and would do so again.

If any form of national providentialism was encouraged by the recollection of the Civil War, it was the judicial version that held that Britain simply received its reward or punishment depending on the virtue of its people and leaders. Some commentators even reverted to the providential quietism of the

⁵⁸ [Cobbett and Hansard], 321.

⁵⁹ Edmund Law, *The Grounds of a Particular Providence, a Sermon Preached before the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, in the Abby Church Westminster, on Wednesday, January XXX, 1771* (London: J. Robson, 1771).

⁶⁰ John Hinchliffe, *A Sermon Preached Before the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, in the Abby Church of Westminster, on Saturday, January XXX, MDCCCLXXIII* (London: J. Robson, 1773), 11.

⁶¹ Brownlow North, *A Sermon Preached Before the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, in the Abbey Church Westminster, on Monday, January 30, 1775* (London: J. Robson, 1775), 17.

Restoration. Thomas Nowell urged the House of Commons to recognize divine right as the only reliable injunction of providence. William Markham, delivering the January 30th sermon to the Lords in 1774, suggested that providence had “confounded all the Projects of human Ambition” during the Civil War and that “not one” of the groups who had contested for power in the seventeenth century “succeeded in its object.”⁶² William Warburton, in a Lords’ sermon from 1760, took the most bleak view of all. A recollection of the events surrounding the regicide, he argued, could give Britons no confidence whatever of providential assistance in the difficult business of civil government:

The *System of Nature* has the Providence of God to curb the blind violence of stubborn matter, which else, in the impetuosity of its course, would soon reduce itself to its former Chaos. The *Political System* has nothing but the Providence of Government to sustain it against its own fury, from falling into Anarchy. But the Providence of Government is weak and bounded; and needeth all the assistance of good subjects to strengthen its hands, and enforce obedience to its insulted Authority. It was the rejection of this salutary duty in some, and the careless discharge of it in others, which, at the fatal period we now commemorate, was the last cause of all the desolation that ensued.

Warburton skipped over the suggestion that God had punished “this miserable Nation,” concentrating instead on human causality and even suggesting that, in civil government at least, Britons were on their own.⁶³

William Markham noted that, at first glance, the events of the regicide appeared “like a Dream in the Night,” and many Britons undoubtedly wished that the memory of what had taken place could be erased.⁶⁴ But the dream persisted even after Britain’s imperial awakening in the eighteenth century, and it obstructed the more expansive vision of national providentialism that might have followed Britain’s victories in the Seven Years’ War. One could identify moments before 1700 at which God had smiled upon the nation – 1605 and 1688 paramount among them – but the period between the two peaks of the “double deliverance” confirmed a cyclical view of Britain’s providential status. Meanwhile, the continuation of ideological rivalries from the seventeenth century into late Hanoverian politics – evident in the battles between Whigs and Tories in Westminster and beyond – ensured that political partisanship impeded the development of historical providentialism as surely as the jagged edges of seventeenth-century history.

When Thomas Hunter chided Britain’s historians for avoiding a providential perspective on the past, he boldly offered Lord Clarendon as an exception to the rule. Clarendon had, according to Hunter, “ingenuously and honestly observed, and pointed out to the reader’s observation the hand of God, as it appears on

⁶² William Markham, *A Sermon Preached before the House of Lords, in the Abbey Church of St. Peter, Westminster, on Monday, January 31, 1774* (London: T. Payne, 1774), 16.

⁶³ William Warburton, “A Sermon, Preached before the Right Honourable the House of Lords, January 30, 1760,” in *Works*, 5: 299–317.

⁶⁴ Markham, 6.

any signal occasion.”⁶⁵ It was left to the *Monthly Review*, which warmly praised Hunter’s book and was sympathetic even to his prescription for providential historiography, to point out that “Lord Clarendon wrote under the power of party prejudice, and was not free from superstition.”⁶⁶ Even after the passage of a century, the Civil War served to confine providential perspectives on the British past to a judicial mode, or to discourage them altogether.

4. “That Awful Goal”: Imperial Decline and the Future of America

In addition to their uncomfortable past, Britons had also to confront a number of anxieties about their future. The imperial acquisitions of the Seven Years’ War, while they occasioned a good deal of celebration, also stirred doubts. Empires from the classical period to the present had fallen as surely as they had risen, and Britain confronted a number of problems in the 1760s that suggested an undertow to military success. To make things worse, a number of Britons argued that America’s future greatness might eventually consign Britain to the margins of world history. This line of thinking, which originated in the early eighteenth century as a way of rescuing the American colonies from British apathy and condescension, came to seem more prescient and perplexing in the years after 1763. The cyclical dictates of judicial providentialism – the sense that, even in triumph, Britons should “rejoice with trembling” – were reinforced by political worries and a growing appreciation of America’s political potential. An amalgam of historical, demographic, and religious doubt further narrowed the providential vision of Britain, even as America’s future seemed ever brighter.

In 1763, in search of a birthday present for George III, Queen Charlotte commissioned an enormous picture of the “numerous conquests made by Britain” in the recent war.⁶⁷ While these far-flung territories could be squeezed within the giant canvas, they proved much harder to manage in reality. In the immediate aftermath of the war, George’s ministers made the disastrous decision to impose “internal” taxation on the colonists. While this seemed reasonable enough to British ministers, it led to a cascade of protest and repression that culminated in the American Revolution. In addition to the problems of imperial management, the thirteen years between the Treaty of Paris and the Declaration of Independence undermined Britons’ faith that the acquisition of empire would solve social and political problems at home. British newspapers fretted over an apparent decline in the nation’s population and the ongoing problems of poverty in Britain’s major cities.⁶⁸ The *London Magazine* noted in 1774 that

⁶⁵ Hunter, 1: 60.

⁶⁶ *Monthly Review* 52, no. 2 (February 1775): 135.

⁶⁷ *Monthly Review* 25, no. 6 (June 1763): 351–52.

⁶⁸ Although emigration from England in the eighteenth century declined by comparison with the seventeenth century, large numbers of emigrants from Scotland, Ireland, and Wales pushed the figures of total emigrating Britons to record levels. Two factors may have accentuated the problem in the minds of commentators from the southeast of England. First, London and the surrounding areas were a major source of English emigrants, which perhaps made a relatively

“the acquisitions of wealth and empire may indeed add to the lustre of a kingdom, but happiness to the multitude is not the consequence.”⁶⁹ Britain seemed to be “visibly in decline,” unable to convert its military victories abroad into stability and prosperity at home.

The idea that Britain was “every day hastening to decay,” as the *London Magazine* put it in 1774, prompted many Britons to reconsider God’s role in British history.⁷⁰ The political scientist John Campbell, in his *Political Survey of Britain* (also published in 1774), eschewed the *Magazine*’s pessimism but acknowledged the need for radical measures to protect Britain’s future. His solution to depopulation was to bring a half million or more Protestant immigrants from northern Europe to the Isle of Wight, Arran, and other coastal islands, a scheme that would enable “Divine Providence” to “prosper” Britain in spite of its recent difficulties.⁷¹ Conversely, other writers wondered whether the removal of the poorest Britons might remedy the nation’s malaise. The leading Edinburgh periodical, the *Scots Magazine*, printed a sermon in 1769 that suggested that God had swept the French from America to make way for Britain’s lower ranks. God’s intervention was so demonstrably evident that indigent Britons had a “duty to pursue the means which divine providence offers for their deliverance.” The sermon held that God would no longer intervene in human history with the miracles and visible judgments of the Bible, but that he could shape current events to the advantage of believers.⁷²

America lay at the periphery of British thinking before the mid-eighteenth century and was originally championed by clergymen and colonial boosters who lamented the very marginality of the continent in the consciousness of most Britons. Perhaps the most famous of these was Bishop George Berkeley, of the Irish Episcopal Church, who moved to Rhode Island in 1728 with the hope of founding a college in Bermuda.⁷³ To succeed in this endeavor, Berkeley depended on the generosity of British philanthropists; and so he talked up the future prospects of America for a British audience. His celebrated poem, “On

modest overall total for England seem more like a hemorrhage. Second, emigration appealed to artisans and craftsmen as well as the urban poor in the decades after the Seven Years’ War, altering the English perception of this population movement from a useful means of discarding the indigent to a dangerous drain on British talent. For an overview of recent literature and statistics, see James Horn, “British Diaspora: Emigration from Britain, 1680–1815,” in P. J. Marshall, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 2: *The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 28–52. Horn confirms that the majority of British emigrants set out for America during this period.

⁶⁹ *London Magazine* 45, no. 5 (May 1774): 228–30. See also the article in the same issue entitled “Causes of Depopulation,” 227.

⁷⁰ *London Magazine* 43, no. 3 (March 1774): 141.

⁷¹ John Campbell, *A Political Survey of Britain*, 2 vols. (London: Printed for the Author, 1774), 1: 452, 638.

⁷² “Seasonable Advice to the Landholders and Farmers in Scotland,” *Scots Magazine* 31, no. 12 (December 1769): 651–52.

⁷³ On Berkeley, see Ned C. Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture, 1680–1760* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 177.

the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America,” was a plea for Britons to take notice of the fledgling colonies and to recognize America’s spiritual and historical significance. Blending the classical idea of imperial transfer (*translatio imperii*) with a Christian teleology, Berkeley suggested that faith and learning were on a global march – “Westward the course of empire takes its way” – and that the culmination of this progress would be the most spectacular society ever created. (“Time’s noblest offspring is its last.”)⁷⁴

Not everyone in Britain was persuaded by this, and even after the conquests of the Seven Years’ War there were those who doubted whether God had much interest in America.⁷⁵ But other preachers – American and British – followed Berkeley in arguing for *translatio imperii* in the 1760s, or revived seventeenth-century arguments about the importance of converting American Indians.⁷⁶ In 1767 Connecticut minister Nathaniel Whitaker came to Edinburgh seeking donations for Indian missions, telling his audience that their generosity would “concur with the openings of Providence to advance the kingdom of our Redeemer.” The *Scots Magazine* reprinted his address, praised “this great and godlike design,” and urged that Whitaker’s appeal be distributed to every minister in Scotland. One wag from Lochaber, exasperated by the deluge of such appeals for America, complained to the *Magazine* that the Highlands were just as deserving of missionaries: “If we persevere long in our present method, I would not be surprised soon to see us travelling to the banks of the Ohio and Mississippi, and craving their assistance, towards the establishment and propagation of the gospel of Jesus in their mother-country.” Missing from these domestic missions, however, was the sense of grandeur and of novelty that adhered to American prospects. To convert the Native Americans was to open a train of “important consequences” both commercial and spiritual, from the rather banal prospect of a greater “demand for British manufactures to clothe the new subjects” to the possibility that this harvesting of souls might hasten Christ’s return.⁷⁷

Before 1763 most Britons did not view America as a rival or a threat to British preeminence. The idea that America might be destined for future greatness, however, had often been advanced in British sermons and newspapers. Reprinting extracts from one such sermon in 1763, London’s *Monthly Review* conceded

⁷⁴ “On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America,” in George Berkeley, *A Miscellany, Containing Tracts on Various Subjects* (Dublin: George Faulkner, 1752), 185–86. For Berkeley’s Bermuda plan, see “A Proposal for the Better Supplying of Churches in our Foreign Plantations,” in *ibid.*, 188–210.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Bishop William Warburton’s suggestion in 1759 that the battles between European powers over “desarts of their own making in the new world” were too trivial to bother God: these were not conflicts in which he “is likely, in any extraordinary manner, to interfere.” Warburton, “A Sermon, Preached at Bristol,” 403.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Daniel Watson, *A Sermon Preached on Occasion of the Brief for the American Colonies* (London: J. Richardson, 1763). The sermon was also printed in separate editions in Newcastle and York in 1763.

⁷⁷ *Scots Magazine* 29, no. 6 (June 1767): 281–84; and 29, no. 8 (August 1767): 418–19.

that *translatio imperii* might, indeed, be “very true: we know that the seats of knowledge have shifted, and have left places as dark as they once found them.” On the one hand, this process was a welcome rebuke to religious skepticism: “Thus may the transmigration of religion from one country to another be naturally accounted for, without supposing, as many do, the Almighty to shift about what is esteemed the true faith, from one country to another, eternally thwarted and disappointed in his purposes.” On the other hand, *translatio imperii* suggested that the penumbra of divine favor would move on from Britain, leaving the nation to its former disappointments and travails. The *Review* conceded this possibility and hoped only that learning and religion would not disappear entirely from Britain’s shores.⁷⁸

After 1763 the deepening quarrel between Britain and its American colonies politicized this language of imperial transfer. Colonists and their British supporters employed the idea of America’s great future to wring concessions from Parliament, and British commentators struggled to respond. Nicholas Ray, a prominent London merchant who enjoyed good relations with American radicals, wrote a pamphlet during the Stamp Act crisis that both chided Britain for forcing the Puritans to New England (the continent was “peopled by our persecution”) and predicted America’s supremacy in the years to come: “[N]ot a doubt can be entertained that this vast Country will, in Time, become the greatest Empire that the World has ever seen.”⁷⁹ British defenders of the Stamp Act, meanwhile, grounded their suspicions toward the colonists on precisely the same estimation of America’s potential.⁸⁰

Nicholas Ray predicted that America would eclipse Britain within three decades, and that British ministers should therefore “desert the Idea of being long able to subject [America] to our Power.” In the turbulent decade leading to Lexington, this idea was not confined to the margins of British thinking. Arthur Young, a prominent economist and agricultural theorist, argued in 1772 that America’s superior resources and agricultural capacity would quickly tip the balance of power away from the mother country. “In that period,” he blithely announced, “the King of Great Britain will be much wanting to himself if he does not determine, at all events, to reign over the most numerous part of his subjects.” Foreshadowing the extraordinary exodus of the Portuguese court to Brazil in 1807, Young prescribed extreme measures for the British sovereign: “Let him man his royal navy, and at the head of a gallant army, and those who

⁷⁸ *Monthly Review* 28, no. 5 (May 1763): 408.

⁷⁹ Nicholas Ray, *The Importance of the Colonies of North America, and the Interest of Great Britain with Regard to them Considered, together with Remarks on the Stamp Duty* (London: T. Peat, 1766), 11, 5. The pamphlet (along with the essay by “Vindex Patriae,” cited in note 80) was reprinted in several British publications, including *Scots Magazine* 27, no. 12 (December 1765): 636–38. On the complex political situation in Britain in 1765–66, and the interest of most London merchants in repealing the Stamp Act, see Edmund S. Morgan and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundru Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1995), 271–92.

⁸⁰ See, for example, “Vindex Patriae,” *Gazetteer*, December 23, 1765, 1.

will follow royalty, transfer the seat of empire to that country, which seems almost peculiarly formed for universal dominion.”⁸¹

Young was not alone in seeing this outlandishly literal understanding of *translatio imperii* as the means by which European powers might retain their influence in an age of revolution. In 1783, as Paris and Madrid enjoyed their triumph over Britain in the War of American Independence, Spain’s ambassador to France sent a secret memorandum to Charles III suggesting the division of the Spanish empire into three independent nations, each to be ruled by a Spanish prince.⁸² Twenty-four years later, as Napoleon Bonaparte flattened his Iberian neighbors in a sweeping land invasion, the Portuguese king Dom João VI sailed his entire court to Brazil (under British escort) and established a line of Portuguese-Brazilian emperors who would rule until 1889.⁸³ Arthur Young had not witnessed these extraordinary shifts of power when he made his proposal in 1772, and he urged his readers to escape from any patriotic self-regard as they imagined the future. The relocation of the British monarchy to America should proceed from the blunt and unromantic realization that the “*total* converse of the present case” – with “America the seat of government, and Britain the dependent” – was extremely likely in the long run.⁸⁴

Perhaps it is not surprising that, at this moment, Young seriously considered emigrating to America himself. (He was talked out of the move by his mother, who had to dissuade her son once again in 1779 when the same desire gripped his mind.)⁸⁵ Young’s suspicion that America’s future might eclipse Britain’s imperial prospects was symptomatic of a broader British awareness after the Seven Years’ War that the vision of Bishop Berkeley might feature Britain as the instrument of American glory, rather than the reverse. By the mid-1770s, those who remained unconvinced about America’s prospects and

⁸¹ Ray, 6; and [Arthur Young,] 430, *Political Essays Concerning the Present State of the British Empire* (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1772), 430.

⁸² The Spanish ambassador, the Count of Aranda, proposed that the separate American kingdoms be united under a Spanish emperor and that these kingdoms be tied to Spain by commercial tributes and intermarriage with the Spanish royal house. J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 367. Elliott notes that this proposal went nowhere, and he groups it with the more prosaic (but more desperate) effort of Lord Shelburne to combine American independence with crown authority before the signing of the Peace of Paris in 1783.

⁸³ João was prince regent of Portugal until the death of his deranged mother in 1816, after which he became Dom João VI. He returned to rule Portugal in 1821 in response to an ultimatum from the Portuguese parliament, leaving his son, Pedro, in charge of the territory. Pedro disappointed him by breaking with Portugal and declaring himself to be the new emperor of Brazil less than two years later. The British played an instrumental role in escorting the Portuguese court to South America and guaranteeing its safety from Napoleon’s forces, and they were rewarded by the opening of Brazilian trade (previously restricted to Portugal) just days after João’s arrival in 1808. For an account of this episode, see Peter Bakewell, *A History of Latin America: Empires and Sequels, 1450–1930* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 380–84.

⁸⁴ [Young], 430.

⁸⁵ Young’s “serious thoughts of quitting the kingdom and going to America” (and his mother’s role in quashing them) are recounted in M. Betham-Edwards, ed., *Autobiography of Arthur Young* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1898), 61, 83.

Britain's supposed decline were distressed to note the extent to which this perspective had taken hold in Britain. An article in the *London Chronicle* complained that "were a man to judge of the times by the complexion of the daily publications in the news-papers, he might consider this country as on the very brink of destruction."⁸⁶

Edmund Burke spoke in Parliament in 1775 of a great trust that providence had placed in Britain, but he argued simultaneously for the need to treat America with a light touch.⁸⁷ John Wilkes, for his part, assured the Commons that the British Empire would surely fall if the government pursued its war with the colonists.⁸⁸ Temple Luttrell, another parliamentary sympathizer with the colonists' cause, noted ominously that "national societies, as well as mortals . . . , have their non-age, their adult vigour, and their decline."⁸⁹ Whatever kindness Britain, in "her florid and athletic stage," could show to America, the colonies would surely "repay to her in some future generation, when she is verging towards that awful goal which must close her race of glory." As the government of Lord North failed to mollify the colonists in 1775, the question of when Britain's "race of glory" would terminate took on a new urgency. By May 1776, the *Scots Magazine* had reprinted Berkeley's highly speculative poem on the westward course of empire, noting only that the bishop had written a "remarkable political prophecy" and that Britain's empire had now been "destroyed."⁹⁰

In the decades before the battles of Lexington and Concord, Britons came to see both the limitations of their own imperial achievement and the troubling potential of America. When the shooting began, many Britons were already gripped by anxiety about God's purposes for their nation, and had hardly converted their military victories in the Seven Years' War into a providential confidence. A few weeks after news of Lexington arrived in Britain, even Lord North's close friend, George Horne, struggled to offer a positive interpretation of events. Preaching a sermon in Oxford entitled "The Providence of God Manifested in the Rise and Fall of Empires," Horne concluded that no nation in human history had enjoyed God's favor for long: "Empires," he argued with a piquant sense of timing, "are mortal. They sink, to rise no more." Divine favor depended on national virtue, national virtue was impossible to sustain, and human history was a tangle of triumphs and tragedies: "All below is inconstancy and agitation."⁹¹ Britons, then, could adopt Horne's endorsement of

⁸⁶ *London Chronicle*, June 29–July 1, 1775, 623.

⁸⁷ [Cobbett and Hansard], 17: 496–500 (March 27, 1775).

⁸⁸ Note Wilkes's speech of October 26, 1775, before the Commons, arguing that a violent suppression of the American rebellion would ensure that "an eternal separation will succeed, and the grandeur of the British empire pass away." Reprinted in *Scots Magazine* 37, no. 11 (November 1775): 613.

⁸⁹ [Cobbett and Hansard], 18: 347 (February 27, 1775).

⁹⁰ *Scots Magazine* 38, no. 5 (May 1775): 266.

⁹¹ George Horne, *The Providence of God Manifested in the Rise and Fall of Empires, A Sermon Preached at St. Mary's in Oxford, at the Assizes . . . on Thursday, July 27, 1775* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1775), 22. For another example of the idea that providence directed a "constant

judicial providentialism and view history as cyclical: the British Empire was effectively fleeting, and believers should ground their hopes on personal salvation. Alternatively, they could follow Berkeley and others in endorsing a progressive historical scheme, but had then to concede that America would transcend its colonial parent as “time’s noblest offspring.” Neither of these perspectives offered much comfort to Britons on the eve of the Revolutionary War.

5. “Open Paths”: The Development of American Providentialism

By the end of the seventeenth century, New England ministers, historians, and orators had established a distinctive historical providentialism for America. In an effort to avoid reckoning with the recent (and messy) history of England, these New Englanders narrated a process of “national” development for English America that appeared either to marginalize or even to deny the substantial role of England in the colonizing process. This distinct perspective was limited, however, in three respects. First, it carried only a modest political charge and was rarely applied to questions of colonial autonomy or independence from Britain. Second, it was largely limited to New England. Third, it did not establish a monopoly among American providential interpreters. Judicial and apocalyptic interpretations continued to flow from American presses, even as historical providentialism gained popularity as a method of understanding the meaning of the European settlements in America. How, then, did historical providentialism become politicized in the years before the American Revolution? And how did it escape from its base in New England to inspire patriotic rhetoric from Maine to Georgia?

Many American historians have looked to the Seven Years’ War as an incubator for the providential understandings that would fire the American Revolution.⁹² A comparison of American war sermons with their British counterparts, however, suggests that there were more similarities than differences in providential rhetoric before 1763. Americans observed the British fast days; they celebrated the capture of Montreal on the last Thursday of November in 1759,

revolution” in the fate of nations, see “Anecdotes of the Succession in the Russian Empire,” *Scots Magazine* 24, no. 7 (July 1762): 341–48. An earlier variant of Horne’s argument was offered by Edwards, 12.

⁹² This interpretation was initially advanced by Nathan O. Hatch, “The Origins of Civil Millennialism in America: New England Clergymen, War with France, and the Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1974): 407–30. See also Hatch’s *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). Hatch rejects previous interpretations suggesting that the First Great Awakening fostered the development of a distinctive providential identity for America. John Berens, meanwhile, has argued that the Great Awakening and the French and Indian War were crucial “preludes” to Revolutionary providentialism: Berens, *Providence and Patriotism in Early America, 1640–1815* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 28–50. A critique of Hatch’s claims about the prominence of millennial rhetoric is offered by Melvin B. Endy Jr., “Just War, Holy War, and Millennialism in Revolutionary America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1985): 3–25. However, Endy’s article overlooks providentialism entirely.

the same day that Richard Price offered his striking vision of the global expansion of liberty from his pulpit near London; they preached funeral sermons to mark the death of George II in the winter of 1760–61. Beyond this similarity in religious practice, the themes of American sermons overlapped with their British analogues. Rather than declaring a special providential destiny for New England, many preachers imagined the British nation as a single providential unit that spanned the Atlantic and encompassed both Britain and America, even as they credited God with a broader interest in the Protestant cause in Europe.⁹³

American sermons also endorsed the British understanding of providence as cyclical. Ministers suggested that, even in the midst of triumph, they should remember that God's favor was fleeting: Nathaniel Taylor of Connecticut warned in 1762 that, thanks to sin and the difficulty of maintaining public virtue, "there were some Periods, when God did greater things for Israel, than at others."⁹⁴ If we can detect any evidence of a more ambitious articulation of American identity in these sermons, it is fairly muted and certainly not as strident as Richard Price's 1759 version of a British national providentialism. James Horrocks, an Anglican minister from Williamsburg and a faculty member of the College of William and Mary, after crediting God in 1763 with having "taught our Hands to war and our Fingers to fight so very successfully," suggested that Americans had a responsibility to "apply your Affluence and Abundance to the Purposes Providence design'd." The exact nature of these purposes was unclear.⁹⁵

A few preachers reached for broader visions of America's future. Eli Forbes of Massachusetts told his congregants in 1760 that they should be "workers together with God" if they wanted a glorious destiny for America to be "more than Prospect." Excited by the expulsion of the French forces from Canada, Forbes sketched this providential vista: "Methinks I see Towns enlarged, Settlements increased, and this howling Wilderness become a fruitful Field, which the Lord hath blessed; and to complete the Scene, I see Churches rise out of the Superstitions of Roman Bigotry."⁹⁶ More typical was the caution expressed

⁹³ See, for example, Samuel Chandler, *A Sermon Preached at Gloucester, Thursday, November 29, 1759, Being the Day of the Provincial Anniversary Thanksgiving* (Boston: Green and Russell, 1759), 27; Samuel Haven, *The Supreme Influence of the Son of God, in appointing, directing, and terminating the Reign of Princes, A Sermon Occasioned by the Death of King GEORGE the Second, and the Happy Accession of His Majesty King George the Third, to the Imperial Throne of Great-Britain, Delivered at Portsmouth, January 25th, 1761* (Portsmouth, N.H.: D. Fowle, 1761), 17; and Nathaniel Taylor, *Praise Due to God for all the Dispensations of his Wise and Holy Providence, A Sermon Preached at Crown-Point, at the Close of the Campaign, 1762* (New Haven: J. Parker and Company, 1762), 9.

⁹⁴ Taylor, 14. See also Samuel Woodward, *A Sermon, Preached OCTOBER 9, 1760, . . . On Occasion of the Reduction of Montreal and the entire Conquest of CANADA* (Boston: Benjamin Mecom, 1760).

⁹⁵ James Horrocks, *Upon the Peace: A Sermon, Preach'd at the Church of PETSWORDTH, in the County of Gloucester, on August the 25th* (Williamsburg: Joseph Royle, 1763), 5, 9.

⁹⁶ Eli Forbes, *God the Strength and Salvation of his People; illustrated in a Sermon, Preached October 9, 1760* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1761), 33.

by Connecticut minister James Lockwood in 1763. While Lockwood recognized the hope that the French expulsion could inaugurate a glorious future for English America, encompassing Indian conversions and even the “long and happy Period of a Thousand Years” that was promised in the book of Revelation, he cautioned that “this blessed Period, ’tis probable, will not come on, till we are dead and forgotten in the Earth.”⁹⁷ The outcome of the war encouraged the idea that America’s future was bright, but commentators in and beyond New England were reluctant to deny Britain’s role in the victory or to exempt America from the cyclical pattern of divine favor.

The crisis over the Stamp Act can be more plausibly identified as the moment at which a distinctively American national providentialism began to emerge with political intent; though even here colonists tended to defer to Britain and accept the status of co-workers in the providential scheme.⁹⁸ The role of William Pitt in arguing the American case in the House of Commons had not escaped the notice of the colonists, many of whom credited Pitt with the victories over France in the Seven Years’ War.⁹⁹ Pitt’s speeches in Parliament against the Stamp Act were presented by Americans as providential. Boston preacher Charles Chauncy, addressing a joyous crowd after news of the act’s repeal had reached Boston, argued that God dictated “the thoughts, the views, the purposes, the speeches, the writings, and the whole conduct of all who were engaged in this great affair . . . to bring into effect the desired happy event.”¹⁰⁰ Just as God had used Pitt as an instrument during the recent war, so the aging statesman had served the purposes of providence in this new crisis. God had been “speaking to us in his providence,” noted a Connecticut preacher, and Americans had to recognize and make “the best improvement” of these favors.¹⁰¹

Paeans to Pitt and providence were hardly corrosive to a shared providential identity for Britain and America, especially in the relieved addresses that greeted the news of repeal in the summer of 1766. But before Parliament backed down, the crisis encouraged colonists to ponder the exceptional nature of American liberty and to see Britain as a persistent villain in American history.

⁹⁷ James Lockwood, *A Sermon Preached at Weathersfield, July 6, 1763, Being the Day Appointed for a Public Thanksgiving* (New Haven: James Parker, 1763), 8, 33, 34.

⁹⁸ For the argument that the Stamp Act crisis was formative in the construction of American national providentialism, see John F. Berens, “‘Good News from a Far Country’: A Note on Divine Providence and the Stamp Act Crisis,” *Church History* 45, no. 3 (1976): 308–15. It should be noted, however, that Berens (in his *Providence and Patriotism in Early America*) is extremely vague about the relative importance of several major colonial episodes – including the First Great Awakening, the Seven Years’ War, and the Stamp Act crisis – in this process.

⁹⁹ On Pitt’s involvement, see Morgan and Morgan, 272–91.

¹⁰⁰ Charles Chauncy, *A Discourse on “the good News from a far Country”* (Boston: Kneeland and Adams for Thomas Leverett, 1766), 28. See also Nathaniel Appleton, *A Thanksgiving Sermon, on the Total Repeal of the Stamp-Act, Preached in Cambridge, New England, May 20th* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1766), 29, 22–23.

¹⁰¹ Benjamin Throop, *A Thanksgiving Sermon, Upon the Occasion of the glorious News of the repeal of the STAMP ACT* (New-London: Timothy Green, 1766), 6, 9.

This narrative – which held that Americans had crossed the ocean to defend “sacred Freedom” and had prospered without Britain’s involvement – was neither accurate nor particularly relevant to the colonies outside New England, but it was enthusiastically adopted by many Americans both to caricature the latest round of British repression and to defend America’s position as idealistic and venerable. While the immediate purpose of this rhetoric was to unite the colonies against British policies, its persistence in and beyond the victory speeches of 1766 suggested its potential for a full-blown separatism. Even in the brief moment of rejoicing that followed the crisis, American colonists argued that they had reached their current level of prosperity and liberty because of their own initiatives, in an unbroken span that dated to the 1620s and largely excluded British involvement.¹⁰²

This position was most forcefully articulated by Rhode Island minister David Rowland, whose thanksgiving sermon in June 1766, *Divine Providence Illustrated and Improved*, contrasted the providential history of Britain and America. The English nation had certainly enjoyed the “light” of divine assistance during the Reformation and the Glorious Revolution, but the period in between these bright moments was murky: “The sun that broke out, was soon clouded; and the light which was diffusing itself, was soon obscured, and darkness covered the face of [the] earth.” God’s favors toward England in the seventeenth century “waxed and waned like the moon.” In America, by contrast, the settlers enjoyed the constant protection of God from the moment of their arrival. Rowland endorsed the idea of other preachers that the settlers had fled a “cruel” and “oppressive” regime so that they might “taste the sweets of liberty”; but he also claimed that the development of the colonies was dependent entirely on God rather than on Britain. The colonists, with God’s help, “supported and defended themselves, at their own cost and charge, without the least aid and assistance from their parent country.”¹⁰³

Rowland’s argument made perfect sense in the context of the Stamp Act crisis. British ministers maintained that the new duties in America were necessary to pay for the upkeep and security of the colonies, benefits that Americans had long enjoyed without paying their share of the expense. The American response was, understandably, to play down Britain’s integral role in America’s development. When expressed in providential terms, this encouraged the argument that British and American history had been moving on entirely different tracks. Britain enjoyed God’s favor in cycles and bursts, whereas America had been protected and favored by God since the early seventeenth century. American history was thoroughly intertwined with events in Britain – from

¹⁰² See, for example, Thomas Plant, *Joyful News to America, A Poem* ([Philadelphia]: n.p., 1766), 6; and William Patten, *A Discourse Delivered at Halifax in the County of Plymouth, July 24th 1766* (Boston: D. Kneeland for Thomas Leverett, 1766), 20, 14, 15.

¹⁰³ David S. Rowland, *Divine Providence Illustrated and Improved, A Thanksgiving Discourse Preached (by Desire) in the PRESBYTERIAN, or Congregational Church in Providence, N.E., Wednesday June 4, 1766* (Providence, R.I.: Sarah Goddard, and Company, 1766), 8–9, 12, 14.

the American fascination with the English Civil War, through the effects of the Glorious Revolution on colonial politics, to the transatlantic lobbying of colonists like Benjamin Franklin, the connections between the center and the periphery of the British Empire were evident to any impartial observer. But the political imperatives of the 1760s encouraged an impassioned, exceptionalist understanding of American history that was anything but impartial. Rowland and others may not have intended this rhetoric to culminate in independence, but its effect was to exaggerate America's autonomy and its claims to a distinct role in God's scheme.

As relations between Britain and America worsened, a providential separatism became more pronounced. While this separatism was still predominantly a New England creation, the events of the early 1770s dispersed ideas of a distinctly American history throughout the colonies. An important delivery mechanism was the rhetoric surrounding the "Boston Massacre," the confrontation between protesters and British troops that enraged Americans within and beyond New England. On March 5, 1770, the Twenty-ninth Regiment of the British army, assigned to protect the customhouse from the persistent protests of the colonists, responded to a motley fusillade of trash and snowballs with gunfire. Five Bostonians were killed, and several more were seriously injured. Although the details were not entirely clear, colonial propagandists appropriated the killings both to protest the British occupation of Boston and to develop the idea that British and American history were essentially divergent. The "bloody tragedy" of March 5th was commemorated in Boston through the early years of the Revolution, and the orations delivered each year were widely reprinted throughout British America.

The first orator chosen by the Boston town committee was James Lovell, a schoolteacher and businessman who would eventually represent Massachusetts in the Continental Congress. In 1771 he attracted such a vast crowd to Faneuil Hall that his oration had to be moved to the larger Old South Meeting House, an appropriate setting for both the providential and political themes of the address. Lovell noted that providence had some reason for allowing these Patriots to be killed – recalling the famous line from Matthew's gospel that God was responsible even for the fate of a "single sparrow" – and then asserted that America's founders had "left their native land, risked all the dangers of the sea, and come to this then-savage desert, with that true undaunted courage which is excited by a confidence in GOD." The purpose of the journey was to allow them to enjoy "full *English Liberty*" and then to bequeath this inheritance to their successors.¹⁰⁴

The following year, the committee chose Joseph Warren to deliver the March 5th address. Warren, as the author of the first pamphlet on the "massacre," had been instrumental in presenting the events as an outrage against

¹⁰⁴ James Lovell, *An Oration, Delivered April 2d, 1771, . . . To Commemorate the Bloody Tragedy of the Fifth of March, 1770* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1771), 6, 7.

American liberty. In his 1772 address, he concurred with Lovell that English and American history had diverged in the 1620s, rather than the 1760s; in fact, American history might be properly understood not as a constituent part of a broader British narrative but as a sequel to an older and now-defunct period of English glory. Warren also suggested that, given God's constant favor since the founding of the first settlements in the early seventeenth century, American colonists should "have the strongest confidence that THE SAME ALMIGHTY BEING who protected your pious and venerable fore-fathers – who enabled them to turn a barren wilderness into a fruitful field, who so often *made bare his arm* for their salvation, will still be mindful of you their offspring."¹⁰⁵ John Hancock employed precisely the same argument in his 1774 address on the same occasion, urging upon his audience that – given God's extraordinary treatment of the colonies in the past – Americans could have a "most animating confidence that the present noble struggle for liberty will terminate gloriously for America."¹⁰⁶

In March 1775 British commander Thomas Gage had already embarked upon the military raids that would culminate in violence at Lexington and Concord the following month. Boston's Patriot leaders once again entrusted the commemoration of the Boston Massacre to Joseph Warren, who followed the lines of argument that his predecessors had clearly marked out. Warren not only established a separate historical identity for America, in tandem with divine intentions, but included Britain in the story as a hostile and jealous onlooker, interested in America only from a predatory perspective and content to ignore the colonists until they had acquired enough money and trade to invite extortion. Having "nobly resolved never to wear the yoke of despotism," the founders of America journeyed across the ocean with the support of "approving Heaven." When they arrived, they "found the land swarming with savages, who threatened death with every kind of torture"; but even these fearsome Indians were "far less terrible than slavery," which England was now seeking to impose. Although there were formal charters governing the colonies, Warren argued that the Crown had no right to enforce these (the king might, "with equal propriety and justice, have made them a grant of the planet Jupiter") and that, in any case, "neither the Prince nor the people of England" were "much interested in the matter."¹⁰⁷

Britain's interest in America emerged only after "this widely extended continent had been cultivated and defended." Perhaps conscious of the fact that the fond feelings that many Patriots had expressed for Britain as recently as

¹⁰⁵ Joseph Warren, *An Oration, Delivered March 5th, 1772, . . . to Commemorate the Bloody Tragedy of the Fifth of March, 1770* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1772), 7, 18.

¹⁰⁶ John Hancock, *An Oration, Delivered March 5, 1774, at the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston, to Commemorate the Bloody Tragedy of the Fifth of March 1770* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1774), 20, 15.

¹⁰⁷ Joseph Warren, *An Oration Delivered March Sixth, 1775. At the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston; to Commemorate the Bloody Tragedy of the Fifth of March, 1770* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1775), 6–9.

1766 could not be entirely erased, Warren cast Anglophilia as a recreational activity for Americans: "When the business of the day was past," the American colonist "solaced himself with the *contemplation* or perhaps entertained his listening family with the *recital* of some great, some glorious transaction which shines conspicuous in the history of Britain." The colonist might even, with an "elevated fancy," narrate the story of a global empire and an aggrandized British nation that "cast a veil over the Roman glory." But for Warren, a sense of shared identity between Britain and America was largely fictional and belied by God's unbroken providential favor of America rather than Britain. When he died barely three months later, shot in the head by a Redcoat while defending the Patriot position in the Battle of Breed's Hill, his memory and his fiery address were consecrated throughout the colonies by his sacrifice.¹⁰⁸

By 1775 American ministers and orators had successfully detached American history from Britain and had challenged the colonists to focus upon their relationship with God rather than with the mother country. A few preachers saw this turn toward God as essentially apolitical: the current troubles were caused by the colonists' sins, and they would do better to focus on remedying their personal conduct rather than plotting a separatist course.¹⁰⁹ Many propagandists focused instead on God's active involvement in the present crisis, reassuring the colonists about their dangerous course of action and nudging them toward a decisive rejection of Britain. Recognizing God as the arbiter of human history would give Americans the necessary confidence to challenge British power: "If we are possessed of, and governed by the true fear of the omnipotent Jehovah," said one Connecticut preacher in 1775, "we shall have no reason to fear what a pretended *omnipotent parliament*, or any man or body of men can do against us."¹¹⁰ A survey of American history, meanwhile, suggested to another Connecticut minister that God intended America rather than Britain as the site of "a future empire" that had been given to the colonists (rather than to the king) "in embryo."¹¹¹ God had "protected, nourished, and multiplied" his American people from the earliest days and was hardly likely to abandon them now. Although, as we shall see, the recognition of God's providential favor did not release the colonists from moral obligations or remove the need for public virtue, it allowed Americans to escape from an all-encompassing British history and to deny that Britain was the principal arbiter of their destiny.

Perhaps the most powerful element of this historical providentialism concerned the obligations of the colonists to follow God's plan for American history. John Hancock argued in 1774 that Americans had a duty to "play the man

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 10–11.

¹⁰⁹ Ebenezer Chaplin, *Civil State Compared to Rivers, all under GOD's controul, and what People have to do when Administration is grievous* (Boston: John Boyles, 1773), 22.

¹¹⁰ Enoch Huntington, *A Sermon, Delivered at Middletown, July 20th, AD 1775* (Hartford: Eben. Watson, 1775), 22, 24.

¹¹¹ Moses Mather, *America's Appeal to the Impartial World* (Hartford: Ebenezer Watson, 1775), 21.

for our God” and to defend their country in accordance with his wishes. William Stearns, a Massachusetts minister, was still more explicit about what Americans owed God. Stearns first rehearsed the familiar argument that the colonists had been brought to America by divine injunction and that God intended the continent to be settled and governed by Americans in perpetuity:

And it appears that he gave it to us to inherit, in that Americans from our ancestors downward, 'till very lately, have had the peculiar smiles of Heaven. Where? – in what country, was it ever known that a people arose from paucity to populousness so fast? When in any other part of the world, did three millions of people exist in one collective body, in a country discovered for them but little more than a century and a half?

This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes!

The knowledge of God's intentions brought joy to Americans but also demanded responsibility. Stearns, addressing his audience just a few weeks after the fighting at Lexington, hoped that no one would refuse to fight on behalf of the American cause: “When God, in his providence, calls to take the sword; if any refuse to obey, Heaven's dread artillery is levelled against him.” From the providential perspective, Americans had not only the right but the duty to resist Britain. As Massachusetts clergyman Samuel Webster told a gathering of Minutemen in the same year, God's extraordinary support for America since the earliest settlements obligated Americans to march along “the open paths his providence points out.” If the colonists sought to “oppos[e] the power of God to Britain's force,” they had not only to discern these “open paths” from their understanding of American history but to follow them into the future.¹¹²

How widespread was this thinking in the colonies? The development of a historical providentialism for America was concentrated in New England, where the memory of the Boston Massacre and the presence of British troops nourished an especially fervent separatism. Newspapers across the eastern seaboard amplified this regional interpretation of America's destiny to the middle and southern colonies in the years after 1763, a process that culminated in a more broadly dispersed historical providentialism after 1775. Protestants in Virginia or South Carolina were, like their British contemporaries, persuaded that God intervened in the destiny of nations. The work of New England propagandists in the 1760s and early 1770s offered these prospective Patriots an interpretation of God's intentions that might easily be grafted onto an existing framework of providential belief, particularly as the various regions of British America recognized a congruence between their political grievances.

As if to emphasize the readiness of Americans from across the thirteen colonies – and even new immigrants – to absorb historical providentialism,

¹¹² William Stearns, *A View of the Controversy Subsisting Between Great-Britain and the American Colonies, A Sermon Preached at a Fast in Marlborough in Massachusetts-Bay, on Thursday May 11, 1775* (Watertown: Benjamin Edes, 1775), 14, 31; and Samuel Webster, *Rabshakeh's Proposals Considered, in a Sermon, Delivered at Groton, February 21, 1775, At the Desire of the Officers of the Companies of Minute Men in that Town* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1775), 24.

the most strident and visible deployment of this idea was offered by Thomas Paine, who arrived in Philadelphia in November 1774 after spending the first thirty-seven years of his life in England. In *Common Sense*, which Paine wrote in the fall of 1775, he argued that geography and history clearly confirmed God's special plan for America. The distance between the colonies and the mother country was "a strong and natural proof, that the authority of the one over the other was never the design of Heaven." The founding and progress of America clinched the argument: "The time likewise at which the continent was discovered, adds weight to the argument, and the manner in which it was peopled increased the force of it." The discovery of America by Columbus preceded the Reformation by a few decades; the eventual arrival of persecuted Protestants, and their subsequent rise to prominence, confirmed that the American continent was destined to serve a mighty purpose, "as if the Almighty graciously meant to open a sanctuary to the persecuted in future years, when home should afford neither friendship nor safety."¹¹³

If we imagine American exceptionalism to be a product of American experience, we might properly wonder how Paine could have developed this historical providentialism just months after emigrating from England. Instead, we should draw two implications from *Common Sense*: that this form of providential separatism attained wide currency in the colonies only in the 1760s and 1770s; and that the language and ideas that underpinned it – and made it intelligible to an enormous audience in America and Europe – were as familiar to Britons as to Americans. If colonists outside New England could draw upon a preexisting acceptance of God's role in human history, and could thereby embrace historical providentialism without delay, this providential separatism was also legible to the British public. Although far less inclined to accept the American interpretation, Britons also nursed the anxiety that, if events followed the arguments of men like Joseph Warren and Thomas Paine, God might indeed have a special plan for the United States. As the Patriots battled in the years after 1775 to persuade loyalists and skeptics that their revolution enjoyed providential sanction, Britons confronted the unsettling prospect that the colonists might be right.

Conclusion: "People of Different Genius"

William Smith, the provost of the College of Philadelphia who presided over the jubilant commencement ceremony in 1766, had imagined in that heady moment that "Heaven has yet glorious purposes to serve thro' America." By 1775 he found historical providentialism even harder to resist. Although he was ambivalent toward the achievement of complete independence from Britain, his rhetoric ran far ahead of his politics as he was called upon to address various Patriot gatherings across Philadelphia.¹¹⁴ One invitation he failed to

¹¹³ [Thomas Paine], *Common Sense* (Philadelphia: R. Bell, 1776), 38–39.

¹¹⁴ Among the small number of historians who have shown an interest in Smith, the question of his political preferences is somewhat clouded. Horace Wemyss Smith's 1879 biography of his great-grandfather tried to square the circle of Smith's various lunges toward patriotism and loyalism,

turn down came from the city's volunteer militia, fired by the initial skirmishes in Massachusetts and eager to receive a call to arms from the celebrated Dr. Smith. On June 23, 1775, in Philadelphia's Christ Church, Smith offered the militia (as well as the members of the Continental Congress and a "vast concourse of people") his most expansive address to date on the subject of America's providential destiny.¹¹⁵

The *Sermon on the Present Situation of American Affairs* was reprinted throughout America and even in the British press. Smith's peroration brought together many of the themes we have followed through colonial sermons and addresses in the 1760s and 1770s and confirmed the extent of American divergence from the British model of national providentialism. Smith shared once more his "strong and even enthusiastic persuasion, that Heaven has great and gracious purposes towards this continent, which no human power or human device shall be able finally to frustrate." For Americans to realize this destiny—and ensure that the "GENIUS of America will still rise triumphant, and that with a power at last too mighty for opposition" – they had to perform a mental maneuver that involved plotting providential history from the early days of America into a still more glorious future:

Look back, therefore, with reverence look back, to the times of ancient virtue and renown. Look back to the mighty purposes which your fathers had in view, when they traversed a vast ocean, and planted this land.... Look forward to distant posterity. Figure to yourselves millions and millions to spring from your loins, who may be born as *freemen* or *slaves* as Heaven shall now approve or reject your councils... and while you thus look *back* to the *past*, and *forward* to the future, fail not, I beseech you, to *look up* to "the God of Gods – the Rock of your Salvation. As the clay in the potter's hands," so are the nations of the earth in the hands of Him, the everlasting JEHOVAH.

Combining a familiar acknowledgment of divine control over human history with a novel interpretation of God's regard for America, Smith used the language of providence both to bolster his own sense of impending American greatness and to provide a framework of divine involvement by which other Americans might share his optimism.¹¹⁶

presenting Smith as alternately sympathetic to the Revolutionary cause and justified in his concern for a continuation of British rule; Thomas Firth Jones, in his more recent biography, is happier to allow Smith to rest in a Philadelphia loyalism, which Jones takes to be more principled and sage than its Revolutionary rival. Jones's view, in combination with Smith's authorship of the 1776 counterblast to Thomas Paine, *Plain Truth*, has allowed other historians to paint him as a straightforward loyalist and conservative; see, for example, Peter J. Diamond, "Witherspoon, William Smith and the Scottish Philosophy in Revolutionary America," in Richard B. Sher and Jeffrey R. Smitten, eds., *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 115–32.

¹¹⁵ For accounts of the oration, and extracts from its reception in the British press, see Wemyss Smith, 1: 507–23. Wemyss Smith notes that the sermon attracted "vast notice" in Britain and America and was commonly taken to be a plea for American liberty, if not American independence.

¹¹⁶ William Smith, *A Sermon on the Present Situation of American Affairs, Preached in Christ-Church, June 23 1775* (Philadelphia: James Humphreys, 1775), 28, 23–24.

It is ironic that Smith himself had serious doubts about the viability or desirability of American independence, at least as a formal political prospect. His earliest biographer records a creeping realization on Smith's part, in the weeks after he delivered this sermon, that it had been received in Britain and America as a clarion call for independence, incurring the wrath of John Wesley and other English commentators even as it secured the plaudits of such Patriot luminaries as Silas Deane and Benjamin Franklin.¹¹⁷ We explore Smith's dilemma (and that of the American loyalists) in the [next chapter](#), but it is worth noting here that the origins of providential separatism were not necessarily dependent on a clear vision of American political independence. National providentialism may have tempted even ambivalent colonists to imagine a providential destiny for America, and the reception of Smith's sermon indicates that this language could easily escape the restraints placed upon it by its users.

Many Britons, meanwhile, dismissed this emerging historical providentialism as a sham, built on a selective version of American history and a skewed sense of God's involvement in the world. John Wesley attacked William Smith for distorting the true relationship between Britain and America, and the British press was markedly less indulgent toward ideas of American greatness when hostilities commenced.¹¹⁸ It would be wrong, however, to see Smith's providential exceptionalism as somehow innately American or limited strictly to the colonies. While Britons had difficulty in conceiving a homegrown historical providentialism, many commentators worried that the Americans might have stumbled upon a hidden truth about God's plan for the world, or at least that their enthusiastic speculations could not easily be dismissed. In August 1775 the *Monthly Review* in London judged Smith's sermon to be "equally sensible and animated" and could not rule out his predictions for America's future: "If by judging from the past, we may predict of the future, the Doctor may prove a true prophet, without laying any claim to Divine Inspiration."¹¹⁹

Elsewhere in the London press, commentators offered more elaborate concessions to the American point of view. The *London Magazine* hailed America as a rare exception from the rule of imperial decline that prevailed in every other society. While "in all ages the people of most countries . . . have sunk into luxury and effeminacy," the American continent had "create[d] people of different genius, temper, strength, and prowess." Britain was now under "a cloud of grief, disgrace, and ruin, as no time will be ever able to repair or heal," but America would become "the asylum of the world" and would enjoy prominence and prosperity "in the last." The *London Chronicle*, which had itself complained about the doomsaying of the British press in 1775, published an extraordinary article in January 1776 suggesting that "the charter of Old Britain, under which

¹¹⁷ Smith's sermon, according to the London prints, had "greatly engrossed the conversation of the Public." *London Chronicle*, September 14–16, 1775, 265–66. See also Wemyss Smith, 1: 517–23.

¹¹⁸ John Wesley, *A Calm Address to our American Colonies* (London: R. Hawes, 1775), 19–23.

¹¹⁹ *Monthly Review* 53, no. 2 (August 1775): 189–90.

she was raised from obscurity to her late summit of grandeur, is near expired." The nation should thus adopt Arthur Young's suggestion of *translatio imperii* and persuade George III to establish a monarchical dynasty across the Atlantic: "O King! Give a head to thy distant children – let America bow to a son of royalty – let there be a new crown – let the illustrious diadem shine round the locks of a British Prince – shew the world an Emperor of British America." It is hard to determine the popularity of such ideas in 1770s Britain, although they certainly reached a large audience through magazines and newspapers. Even in the unlikely eventuality that such an idea had appealed to George III, however, a prospective Hanoverian emperor would have faced an emerging colonial understanding of providence and history that sought to deny the existence of "British America" in the past, present, and future.¹²⁰

The story of providential separatism is largely unfamiliar to American historians. Those scholars who have examined the nexus of religion and national identity in the 1760s and 1770s have tended to limit their focus to America, and even to confirm older historiographical assumptions about the existence of an innate American exceptionalism. In fact, American separatism emerged from a shared Atlantic understanding of God's involvement in politics and history, an understanding that was widely evident in religious and political rhetoric but which started to unravel in the years after 1763. British national providentialism was constrained from assuming especially strident forms by the interpretive difficulties surrounding the English Civil War, as well as multiple anxieties about imperial decline and America's vast potential. On the American side, the political imperatives of the debate over colonial taxation and dependence created a climate in which separatist myths could flourish. While Britons struggled to spin their history into a single thread of providential favor, Americans cultivated the story of their founding and rearranged their history both to exclude Britain and to invent a providential purpose. The American articulations of historical providentialism were so convincing, in this shared Atlantic framework of ideas, that even some Britons succumbed to their logic.

In the 1760s and 1770s, Americans developed a notion of national identity that bore little relation to reality. From this perspective, Britain and America were entirely separate, had always been so, and were moving on historical trajectories that were controlled by the same God but inclined to vastly different ends. Although this reading of history built upon a seventeenth-century understanding of America's distinct providential identity, it was transformed by the

¹²⁰ "On the Civil War in America," *London Magazine* 44, no. 8 (August 1775): 383–85; and *London Chronicle*, January 25–27, 1776, 93. Once again, the idea of establishing a branch of the Hanoverian monarchy in America anticipates the eventual fate of the Portuguese monarchy in Brazil: Dom João VI hoped that his son Pedro would rule over the colony as emperor in the name of Portugal; though Pedro in fact broke with Portugal (and his father) in 1821. Brazil became a constitutional republic only on the abdication of Emperor Pedro II in 1889.

bitter debates between colonists and British ministers in the dozen years before Lexington and Concord. In 1766 the notion of a shared national providentialism still animated the proud speeches of John Morgan and William Smith, even as both men imagined that God had special purposes for America. Within a decade, this notion of a shared history – and the implication that Britain and America shared a common future – had been largely discarded.

“Becoming a Nation at Once”

Providentialism and the American Revolution

By July 1775 British troops had brutally engaged Patriot forces at Breed’s Hill in Boston, George Washington had been placed in command of the new Continental army, and many Americans had resigned themselves to open war with Britain. The Second Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, had not decisively embraced the cause of independence – on July 5, delegates approved a last-ditch proposal to George III that the two sides should return to the economic and political status quo that prevailed before 1763. (The king dismissed the Olive Branch Petition when it arrived in London the following month and declared the colonists to be in open rebellion.)¹ But in a “Declaration on the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms,” issued by the Congress a day after the petition to George III, it was clear that delegates recognized the potential of historical providentialism to bolster the war effort. Having narrated a history of American development that largely excluded European influence, save to observe that Britain’s pretensions to power were dependent upon its American colonists and trade, the declaration rehearsed arguments that Thomas Paine would popularize a few months later in *Common Sense*. God had never intended one country to maintain such power and influence over another, but he had postponed an inevitable conflict with Britain until the colonists “were grown up to our present strength.”²

On the eve of war, Americans could review their happy history and confront Britain’s military with confidence both in God’s favor and in the trajectory of their historical development. Historical providentialism held that America had been established by freedom-loving colonists who sought to escape from the restrictions of Europe and that the very recent turn toward American independence had been in God’s plans all along. On the other side of the

¹ “A Proclamation for Suppressing Rebellion and Sedition,” reprinted in *Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 1, 1775, [5].

² “Declaration of the Second Continental Congress,” reprinted in *New York Gazette*, July 17, 1775, 1.

Atlantic, meanwhile, Britons scrambled in the summer of 1775 to make sense of American events and to reckon them against God's will. Was the American rebellion a providential punishment for Britain's sins? Or would God enable Britain to crush the revolt and purge America of its radicals? British clergymen and newspapers watched with particular anxiety as the Continental Congress declared separate American fast days, and they were alarmed to read of crowded churches and earnest colonial appeals for divine support. The king blithely declined to set a date for a British equivalent, and some commentators hinted that George III was guilty of procrastination. As the colonies slid from rebellion into revolution, Britons pored over the news from America. They were looking not only for dispatches from the gathering armies and beleaguered British governors but for evidence of God's plans for the colonies and their own nation.

Americans made frequent appeals to providence during the Revolutionary War, and Britons also tried to make sense of American affairs in a providential framework. Patriots used providential arguments to recruit supporters, to inspire militias and the Continental army, and to make sense of disappointments and setbacks. American loyalists sought to read God's purpose without affirming the Patriot argument that God had been schooling the United States for independence from the earliest days of colonization. Those caught in the middle in America – the many colonists who shared the Patriots' grievances against British rule but stopped short of accepting the logic of separation – struggled with providential rhetoric that seemed to undercut the subtlety of their own political position. All the while, Britons tried to fathom God's meaning in the American war and to determine whether the faltering progress of the British armies indicated a dark future for their nation.

When the conflict was over more than eight years later, the extravagant thanksgiving celebrations of Americans found their opposite in the despondent ruminations of British observers. Britons and Americans believed in 1775 that God was involved in the momentous events that were unfolding, and both sides held to this belief in 1783 as the war came to an end. The course and outcome of the fighting, though, encouraged vastly different understandings of God's relationship with each nation and confirmed the distinctiveness of an American national providentialism that – like so much else in the new United States – had its origins in Britain.

1. “The Asylum of Liberty and True Religion”: Patriot Providentialism

While George III dithered over whether to announce a fast day in Britain, the Continental Congress assumed the authority in 1775 to declare separate fasts in the American colonies. The fast-day tradition had been firmly established in New England since the earliest settlements, but Congress sought both to widen the observance of these days across the entire eastern seaboard and to politicize the occasion. Where previous fasts had responded to natural disaster or Indian attacks, Congress now ordered Americans to seek God's assistance in the military conflict with Britain. One of the most celebrated fast-day sermons from the

Revolutionary War was delivered six weeks before the Declaration of Independence by John Witherspoon, president of the College of New Jersey, the future Princeton University. Ascending his pulpit in Princeton, Witherspoon demonstrated both the British roots of providential thinking and the stark divergence of historical providentialism in America.

Witherspoon, like Thomas Paine, was a relatively recent arrival in America. He left Scotland in 1768 to take over the presidency of the College of New Jersey, following a prominent career in the Presbyterian Church. Witherspoon had delivered sermons in Scotland that pondered God's role in British history; one of his thanksgiving addresses from the Seven Years' War suggests that he embraced the judicial providentialism that was widespread among Britons in this period.³ Removed to America, and inspired by the Patriot cause, he developed a bolder formulation of God's will. His 1776 sermon – entitled *The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men* – maintained not only that God controlled the affairs of the world but that Americans could rely on divine assistance in the coming conflict. Since his arrival in Princeton, he had become aware of the “singular interposition of Providence” on America's behalf since the early seventeenth century; it would be “criminal inattention” to ignore the many instances of God's favor. Moreover, even though the massing of British troops suggested that America's immediate future was bleak, Witherspoon assured Americans that God regularly made use of the rage of men to achieve greater ends. Just as the repression of Charles I had spurred the extraordinary settlement of New England, so the tyranny of George III was God's instrument to achieve American independence.⁴

Witherspoon's thesis – that the wrath of Britain would eventually produce a glorious outcome for America – earned him praise among liberal preachers in London (who believed that a military escalation was hardly likely to improve Britain's situation) and opprobrium from some old enemies in Scotland.⁵ But his

³ John Witherspoon, *Prayer for National Prosperity and for the Revival of Religion inseparably connected, A Sermon Preached on Thursday, Feb 16 1758, Being the Day appointed in Scotland for the late Publick Fast* (London: Thomas Field, 1758).

⁴ John Witherspoon, *The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men, A Sermon Preached at Princeton on the 17th of May 1776* (Philadelphia: R. Aitken, 1776). For an account of Witherspoon's intellectual journey from Scotland to Revolutionary America, see Ned C. Landsman, “Witherspoon and the Problem of Provincial Identity in Scottish Evangelical Culture,” in Richard B. Sher and Jeffrey R. Smitten, eds., *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 29–45. It is also important to note that Witherspoon's shift away from a judicial providentialism was more contingent on the American political situation than on any putative conversion to “Puritan” thinking. In this respect, Richard B. Sher's work on Witherspoon and the tradition of the “Scottish jeremiad” is particularly useful: Sher, “Witherspoon's *Dominion of Providence* and the Scottish Jeremiad Tradition,” in Sher and Smitten, eds., 46–64.

⁵ Witherspoon's opponents in Scotland used his sermon to attack those Scottish sympathizers who had previously argued that Witherspoon was a defender of American liberty rather than the cause of American independence. See the introduction and marginal glosses to the Scottish edition of Witherspoon's sermon: *The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men, A*

primary audience was the mass of Americans who viewed the Revolution with a mixture of excitement and dread. Before July 4, 1776, the prospect of independence seemed fantastic to many Americans, and even the later years of the war brought significant victories for Britain and the threat of continued colonial rule. In America, Witherspoon and numerous others used historical providentialism to reassure the ambivalent inhabitants of the new United States. A host of sermons, orations, pamphlets, and newspaper articles sought to deny the reality that the new nation was extremely frail and vulnerable, and to encourage every American to take up arms in the cause of the Revolution. Those who claimed a special destiny for the new nation were animated less by arrogance than by anxiety over the perilous predicament they faced.

The most obvious feature of Revolutionary providentialism was the insistence of its proponents that God would favor the American cause, and the American military in particular. In May 1776, John Witherspoon promised that God would support Patriot soldiers even against a "multitude of opposing hosts," a fairly accurate description of the British force that was converging on Staten Island in preparation for the invasion of New York. Similar reassurances were widespread as Washington sought to recruit and maintain his army in 1775 and 1776.⁶ Providential interpretations were also useful in making sense of military defeat and in restoring the morale of soldiers at the low points of the conflict. From Washington's inglorious retreat through New Jersey at the end of 1776 to the British victories in the southern theater in 1778–80, Patriot propagandists sought to deny the obvious conclusion that God had deserted America and to remind audiences of his constant favor since the founding of New England. Americans should not take "short and contracted views," seeing "only one link in the chain of providence," but should instead recall God's broader plan and wait for the tide to turn.⁷

Behind these claims lay an important shift in providential thinking on the part of Patriots. In the New England fast sermons of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the colonists had been enjoined by their ministers to interpret conflict as a punishment from God. In the Revolutionary War, by contrast, Patriot propagandists presented the conflict as a key stage in God's great plan

Sermon Preached at Princeton on the 17th of May 1776, to which is added, An Address to the Natives of Scotland, residing in America (Glasgow: n.p., 1777). The *Monthly Review* of London, while noting in a 1778 review that Witherspoon was "a little tinctured with fanaticism," not only praised the sermon as "animated and pious," but even suggested that it "might have been delivered, with general acceptance, and possibly with good effect, before any Fast-day audience in this kingdom": another indication that the language of providentialism was intelligible to Britons as well as to the American colonists. *Monthly Review* 58, no. 3 (March 1778): 246–47.

⁶ Witherspoon, *Dominion of Providence*, 39. For other examples, see *Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, September 11, 1775, 1; and *Freeman's Journal and New Hampshire Gazette*, October 22, 1776, 4.

⁷ David S. Rowland, *Historical Remarks, with moral Reflections: A Sermon, Preached at Providence, June 6 1779* (Providence, R.I.: John Carter, 1779), 28, 34. For similar reassurance during Washington's retreat through New Jersey, see *Boston Gazette*, December 30, 1776, 3.

for America. In the early years of the Revolution, some preachers (especially in New England) reached for the older idiom and declared that God was punishing Americans for their “backsliding”: the war was not part of a divine narrative that would liberate the continent from British control but a providential correction induced by the colonists’ sins.⁸ While this rhetoric of moral condemnation might provoke the colonists to improve their personal morals, it would hardly inspire them to challenge the British regulars who were pouring into America. These moralizing sermons presented British oppression as a symptom rather than the cause of America’s difficulties, and they hardly encouraged the view that America’s past and future were auspicious. One preacher dismissively noted in 1777 that “the wickedness of man has been much the same thro’ all generations” and that Americans might therefore “infer that every generation may rationally expect the like punishments and calamities that have been inflicted upon generations back.”⁹ Patriot propagandists sought to escape from this cycle, claiming (like Witherspoon) that God’s wrath would ultimately benefit Americans and presenting American history as progressive and exceptional. Even if one accepted that America was suffering God’s judgment for its sins, according to a widely reprinted article by “a Religious Politician” in 1776, “it is a judgment in mercy, which will leave us infinitely better than it found us.”¹⁰

Historical providentialism had, since the 1650s, oriented American history toward an extraordinary future. Its proponents in the 1770s and 1780s offered this grand future as a counterweight to America’s parlous fortunes in the present. A Connecticut newspaper noted in 1775 that “the conduct of providence and the course of empire since 1757” confirmed that “America will be the grand theatre on which will be displayed both civil and religious liberty in meridian splendor.”¹¹ Patriots elsewhere made extravagant projections of American population increase; one preacher predicted in 1776 that the United States would comprise 192 million people at its bicentennial (a figure not far short of the actual number of 218 million).¹² As the British army took New York in the autumn of 1776 and ejected the Congress from Philadelphia a year later, Patriots tried to shore up the United States in the present by aggrandizing its divinely favored future. In his sermons in 1776 and 1777, Massachusetts minister Samuel West noted that God intended America to be “the asylum of liberty and true religion” and that “Divine Providence had laid a foundation for

⁸ See, for example, Cyprian Strong, *God’s care of the New-England colonies; – His reasonable demands of them; – the fruits they have produced; – and what they have now reason to fear and expect, from his righteous dispensations* (Hartford: Ebenezer Watson, 1777), 29, 19; and *Connecticut Gazette*, March 7, 1777, 1.

⁹ Nicholas Street, *The American States, acting over the Part of the Children of Israel in the Wilderness, and thereby impeding their Entrance into Canaan’s Rest* (New Haven: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1777), 32.

¹⁰ *Pennsylvania Journal and the Weekly Advertiser*, February 6, 1776, 2.

¹¹ *Connecticut Courant*, October 9, 1775, 1. See also *ibid.*, April 22, 1776, 1.

¹² Ebenezer Baldwin, *The Duty of Rejoicing Under Calamities and Afflictions* (New York: Hugh Gaîne, 1776), 38–39. See also *Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 29, 1775, 2.

our becoming a nation at once.” These predictions of an enormous population for the United States bolstered the claim that God favored the ragtag Patriot forces in their current battles with Britain. It was as if the United States had to become an enormous nation in the popular imagination to win a more modest independence in practice.¹³

Perhaps the most elaborate formulation of this aggrandized future was provided by David Ramsay, a Philadelphia doctor who left his native city in 1773 to establish a new practice in Charleston, South Carolina.¹⁴ On July 4, 1778, in one of the first Independence Day orations ever delivered in the United States, Ramsay told a Charleston crowd that the United States would quickly attain continental dimensions, would draw in “thousands and millions of virtuous peasants from Europe,” and would produce “majestic” cities in the American interior. The continent provided a “substratum for empire” against which “the foundation of the Macedonian, the Roman, and the British, sink into insignificance.” Ramsay admitted that some of his audience might think that “these prospects are visionary” – with cause, perhaps, given that the very spot on which Ramsay stood in Charleston would fall to Henry Clinton and the British army less than two years later. But Ramsay boldly dismissed “any puny politician” who might balk at the providential promises, arguing that “the special interposition of Providence in our behalf [during the Revolution] makes it impious to disbelieve the final establishment of our Heaven-born independence.” The Puritans had depicted war as a providential scourge on a sinful people; Ramsay presented war as a divine favor and redefined sinfulness as dissent from his novel interpretation.¹⁵

How did Americans acquire this apparently spontaneous attachment not only to independence but to empire? The enormity of the American continent certainly encouraged such grand thinking, and a simple contrast between North America and Europe persuaded many Patriots that, as a Boston newspaper put it in 1777, “the new world was to surpass the old.”¹⁶ The claim that America had received unbroken favor from God since the early seventeenth century – a cornerstone of the providential separatism that developed in the colonies after 1763 – also licensed grandiose thoughts about America’s future.¹⁷

¹³ Samuel West, *A Sermon Preached before the Honorable Council, and the Honorable House of Representatives* (Boston: John Gill, 1776), 56, 57; West, *An Anniversary Sermon, Preached at Plymouth, December 22nd, 1777, in Grateful Memory of the First Landing of our Pious New-England Ancestors* (Boston: Draper and Folsom, 1778), 44.

¹⁴ On Ramsay, see Eve Kornfeld, “From Republicanism to Liberalism: The Intellectual Journey of David Ramsay,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 9 (1989): 289–313; and Karen O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 204–33.

¹⁵ David Ramsay, *An Oration on the Advantages of American Independence* (Charlestown: John Wells, 1778), 14, 20, 17, 18.

¹⁶ *Boston Gazette*, February 10, 1777, 3.

¹⁷ See, for example, Sylvanus Conant, *An Anniversary Sermon Preached at Plymouth, December 23, 1776* (Boston: Thomas and John Fleet, 1777), 14; Rowland, 34; and *Connecticut Gazette*, April 14, 1775, 4.

Finally, the insight that inspired Bishop George Berkeley's poem – "westward the course of empire takes its way" – seemed particularly relevant after 1775.¹⁸ The notion of *translatio imperii*, when applied to the American Revolution, marginalized Britain's apparent military supremacy by pitting a future American expansionism against Britain's limited capacities for growth. While Britons themselves conceded that their nation was at its zenith, Patriot propagandists used elaborate visions of future empire to argue that the United States had barely begun to realize its destiny. The Revolution fed off the idea of imperial transfer and gave Patriots additional reasons to emphasize the future rather than the present.¹⁹

This last spur to Patriot orators presented a problem as well as an opportunity: what if empire continued to move westward and eventually left America for the Pacific and Asia? While the new nation might enjoy providential favor for a century or two, would the same process that had humbled Britain eventually ensure the eclipse even of the United States? This problem was less pressing in the present, as God appeared eager to fix his protection upon the Revolutionary cause, but it was hard to avoid as Patriots projected an imperial America far into the future.²⁰ One solution that appealed to many Patriots was to present the United States as the cause of humanity in general. This assumption rejected the idea that the nation was to enjoy greatness for its own sake, but instead maintained that America's preeminence would reflect and encourage a worldwide trend toward liberty. Presenting American independence as globally advantageous also enabled Patriots to frame the Revolution as selfless and noble. Theirs was not a partisan position seeking to unite the inhabitants of a single country, but instead a universalist cause that bound together the mass of humanity.

According to Patriot propagandists, America would help the world in two ways. First, it would act as an asylum for the oppressed. David Ramsay urged his compatriots to welcome the "millions" of immigrants who would escape from tyranny and embrace "our excellent forms of government."²¹ Second, those "excellent forms" would exercise a profound influence over European nations, forcing governments either to change their oppressive policies or to make way for more equitable regimes. Ironically, France's decision to join the war on America's side in 1778 encouraged the hope that Europe was already coming under America's influence; although it would take a homegrown revolt eleven years later to sweep Louis XVI from power, one Patriot orator could not resist casting France as "the medium" through which "America may enlighten

¹⁸ On the concept of western "translation," see Kenneth Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), 228–35.

¹⁹ John Witherspoon mentioned in his 1776 sermon that the idea of imperial transfer was very popular among Patriots, though he himself viewed the notion of *translatio imperii* as "a matter rather of conjecture than certainty." Witherspoon, *Dominion of Providence*, 39. For more assertive applications of imperial transfer to the Revolutionary War, see *Connecticut Courant*, July 31, 1775, 1; *Maryland Gazette*, March 6, 1777, 2; and *Newport Mercury*, June 12, 1775, 2.

²⁰ On imperial transfer and the transitory nature of all empires, see *Freeman's Journal*, June 7, 1777, 2; and *Connecticut Courant*, July 31, 1775, 1.

²¹ Ramsay, 13.

Europe.”²² David Ramsay may have been the most hyperbolic proponent of this view in his claim that “the thrones of tyranny and despotism will totter” until America had transformed the world, but his argument was hardly unusual.²³ The United States, it seemed, had been granted an exemption from the cycles of empire. America would not be a simple beneficiary of imperial transfer but would harness its power, reverse its course, and extend liberty throughout the world.

Once again, the origins of this idea of America as globally important lay in Britain. Richard Price had called for the diffusion of British liberties throughout the world following the first victories of the Seven Years’ War, and, even during the Revolution, some American commentators accepted that the project of encouraging global liberty had originally fallen to Britain. The *North Carolina Gazette* maintained that Britain had squandered its opportunity after 1763 to “diffuse the British constitution in its perfection throughout a great part of the world” and that God had subsequently reassigned this role to America.²⁴ Other Patriots argued that God had switched his allegiance much earlier. In 1777 the *Continental Journal* published “an extraordinary prophetic vision,” in which an angel appeared before a quivering Revolutionary with a message about America’s mission and prospects. The angel, dispatched from “the upper regions” and “at the intercession of the first fathers of New England,” assured the Patriot not only that God had “permitted the British administration” to oppress the Americans since the Stamp Act crisis, with a view to facilitating American secession and empire, but that it was the “design of heaven” for Britain to oppress the Puritans in the 1620s, because this “made way for peopling this Country.” Instead of presenting America as Britain’s providential understudy, the *Journal* argued that God had always envisaged the United States as “an asylum to all sufferers from the tyrants of this world” and had created British oppression for the express purpose of establishing an independent America.²⁵

A final and crucial component of Revolutionary providentialism concerned not the makeup of God’s promises to America but the means by which these promises would be fulfilled. In the older tradition of fast sermons and jeremiads, ministers had keyed divine intentions to events that had already taken place. A clergyman might rail against the sins of a community after the devastating effects of a shipwreck, a fire, or an Indian attack. In Revolutionary rhetoric, Americans were offered a series of spectacular promises and visions – from the immediate prospect of victory over Britain to the eventual accomplishment of a

²² *Massachusetts Spy*, August 27, 1778, 2.

²³ Ramsay, 15. See also Abraham Keteltas, *God Arising and Pleading his People’s Cause; or, The American War in Favor of Liberty, Against the Measures and Arms of Great-Britain, Shewn to Be the Cause of God* (Newburyport: John Mycall, 1777), 19–20; and West, *An Anniversary Sermon*, 49.

²⁴ *North Carolina Gazette*, May 1, 1778, 2.

²⁵ *Continental Journal*, April 17, 1777, 2. The same newspaper printed a very similar “extraordinary vision” two years later: April 29, 1779, 1.

global empire – and assured that God would bring them to pass. Instead of hoping that God’s judgments could be averted, Americans were urged to hasten the accomplishment of the providential plan for the nation. God had prepared what the *Pennsylvania Journal* called a “judgment in mercy,” and the responsibility of Patriots was to “improve” providence rather than to appease it.²⁶

These spectacular visions of American greatness were usually conditioned on public behavior in the present and, especially, on the dedication of Americans to the Revolutionary cause. Some Patriots combined a new emphasis on the “brilliant and glorious prospect” of American independence with a more familiar insistence on public virtue: God had mapped out the path that the new nation might follow, and he required moral fortitude on the part of Americans for this vision to be realized.²⁷ Given the difficulty of recruiting and maintaining the Continental army, particularly in the first years of the war, Patriots focused on military service as a providential duty. The “blessing of Heaven” had fallen upon America, argued one Pennsylvania soldier, and required a simple response from Patriots: “[Y]our path is plain before you; immediately fill your battalions.”²⁸ The notion that God’s plan was conditional on military service was used by chaplains in the field to bolster the troops. One Virginia minister insisted in 1778 on the need to “exert ourselves from the highest to the lowest, to deserve the great and wonderful deliverance which Providence hath manifested towards this infant land.” The partnership between the military and God was straightforward: “The more we do for ourselves, the more reason have we to expect the smiles of Providence.”²⁹

Given America’s weaknesses at the start of the Revolutionary War, and the need to persuade potential Patriots that their cause was not entirely hopeless, this view of providence as conditional blended a confidence in America’s prospects with an emphasis on individual agency. The *New England Chronicle* promised in May 1776 that “if we act as Providence now most evidently points out we should act, we shall have the honour of being ‘fellow-workers with God,’ and America will soon become ‘the glory of all lands.’”³⁰ Historical providentialism was both the means by which God had arranged the past and the future, and an invitation to ordinary Americans in the present. God had defined the goal of national greatness, but he required Americans to be his “fellow-workers” in ensuring that this goal was secured. Patriots defined the providential duty of Americans in different ways: some called for public virtue, others for enlistment in the army or courage on the battlefield. (John Jay even argued that God wanted Americans to lend money to the Congress.)³¹ What

²⁶ See note 10.

²⁷ *New Jersey Gazette*, March 25, 1778, 4. See also *Continental Journal*, July 4, 1776, 1.

²⁸ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, January 24, 1778, 4. See also *Maryland Journal*, September 16, 1777, 3.

²⁹ Reprinted in *New Jersey Gazette*, September 9, 1778, 3.

³⁰ *New England Chronicle*, June 6, 1776, 1. See also *Independent Chronicle*, January 2, 1777, 2.

³¹ Jay’s letter was dated September 13, 1779, and reprinted in *New Jersey Gazette*, September 22, 1779, 2.

united these appeals was the promise that America's destiny would be secure if Americans would only do their part, and the warning that any complacency or hesitation in collaborating with God could forfeit the providential reward.³²

American Patriots reworked existing providential ideas and assumptions in the light of two pressing priorities: the need to persuade Americans that their new nation might not only resist but eclipse Britain, and the need to secure political and military support from the public. The ideas of America as a mighty empire in embryo and as a powerful force for global liberty ministered to the first need; the claim that God favored American arms, but that his promises were conditional on the behavior of Patriots, ministered to the second. God had a glorious plan for the United States, but, as Massachusetts preacher John Murray argued in 1779, "the works of providence are done by means."³³ By the final years of the war, as both America and Britain suffered exhaustion from the prolonged fighting, Patriots were able to harness their understanding of providence not only to inspire but to explain and cajole. British commentators seemed rudderless and uncertain about God's intentions, but Patriots maintained that the accomplishment of providential promises awaited only a greater effort on the part of ordinary Americans. "We are not to stand still and gape for our deliverance," urged one newspaper after the fall of Charleston to the British in 1780.³⁴ Patriots thus leveraged the bright future of the United States against its perilous present, insisting all the while that independence and imperial greatness were not only possible but necessary in God's overruling scheme.

2. "To Deceive the Elect": The Limits of Providential Appeal

Constituencies

As these examples suggest, providential language circulated widely in the former colonies, generated by ministers and orators and disseminated by the Patriot press. Although Revolutionary providentialism was concentrated in New England, it regularly appeared in Patriot rhetoric from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and the new southern states. Moreover, the Continental Congress developed a mechanism for encouraging a truly national providentialism in its declaration of fast days. From 1774 onward, every American was encouraged to focus on the role of God in the ongoing conflict and on the responsibilities of Patriots to secure his providential promises. Separate fast days were declared by the individual states during the war, including many of the southern states, but the introduction of a national practice of providential deliberation ensured

³² Peter Thacher, *An Oration Delivered at Watertown, March 5 1776, To Commemorate the Bloody Massacre at Boston* (Watertown: Benjamin Edes, 1776), 14.

³³ John Murray, *Nehemiah; or, The Struggle for Liberty Never in Vain, when Managed with Virtue and Perseverance* (Newbury: John Mycall, 1779), 18.

³⁴ *Continental Journal*, June 22, 1780, 2. For similar views on the meaning of Britain's successful campaigns of 1780, see *Boston Gazette*, May 8, 1780, 1; and June 19, 1780, 2.

that Patriots focused on the broader American community as God's favored constituency in the conflict with Britain.³⁵

In denominational terms, the most active proponents of Revolutionary providentialism were Presbyterians and Congregationalists, who drew direct links between their current situation and the circumstances of the original Puritan migration. Anglicans were surprisingly amenable to the same arguments, even as their professional contact with Britain threatened to undercut their sympathies with American independence. Many leaders of the Revolution – particularly in Pennsylvania and the South – were members of the Church of England, which ensured that the social networks surrounding the Revolutionary vanguard frequently included Anglican ministers. Beyond Presbyterians and Congregationalists, dissenters largely lined up behind the Revolution and accepted the arguments surrounding its providential importance. The Baptist Church, in particular, was so inured to conflict with Britain in the cause of religious liberty that its embrace of the political struggle seemed a small step. Those Anglican ministers in the South who remained loyal to Britain may have exacerbated this process of Baptist alienation, tending toward the hard-line equation of religious and political “enthusiasm” and providing Baptists and other dissenters with little reason to remain within the framework of “British liberty.”³⁶

Revolutionary providentialism was hardly limited to sermons or the writing of religious professionals: it shaped political addresses, orations, newspaper articles, and numerous other forms of Patriot propaganda. Moreover, it was not confined to the majority of Americans who maintained a belief in revealed religion. In 1782 Pennsylvania minister Robert Smith noted triumphantly that “the rankest deist can scarcely deny the hand of Providence in our successes, and the wide door of hope they open to America.”³⁷ The writing of Thomas Paine and other religious skeptics suggests that Smith was right. Paine made use of historical providentialism in *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis*, arguing that America was destined to be a mighty empire and that its struggles with Britain had a global significance. Perhaps Paine used this language strategically, aware that its popular appeal could advance the Revolution. In any case, even if his view of historical causation diverged from that of professed Christians, his sense of a progressive historical process was largely compatible with more ambitious providential arguments.³⁸

³⁵ The most comprehensive overview of religious constituencies and patterns of thought during the Revolutionary period is Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 114–57.

³⁶ On the dilemmas and political choices facing the Anglican clergy in America at this moment, see Nancy L. Rhoden, *Revolutionary Anglicanism: The Colonial Church of England Clergy during the American Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

³⁷ Robert Smith, *The Obligations of the Confederate States of North America to Praise God* (Philadelphia: Francis Bailey, 1782), 28.

³⁸ For Paine's providentialism in *Common Sense*, see Chapter 2, note 113 and accompanying text. See also Paine, *American Crisis*, Number V (Lancaster: John Dunlap, 1778), 21–23.

The coalition that gathered around Revolutionary providentialism in America was broad but unstable, encompassing two religious poles in a single vision of national purpose: the proponents of religious dissent, who were commonly marked out by the British as “enthusiasts” and were most prone to imagining God’s active intervention in the world; and the proponents of deism, regarded by both the British and by most American believers as having no religion whatever. Revolutionary providentialism was, in the short term, extremely successful in uniting these groups (as well as a middle ground consisting of Anglicans and moderate Presbyterians) behind a single religious nationalism. If British commentators sought to present the Americans as mere enthusiasts, the breadth of the providential coalition – featuring doctors, lawyers, politicians, and others, in addition to clergymen – undermined any sense of religious fanaticism. On the other hand, any effort to present Americans as libertines or freethinkers was stymied by the undeniable piety of the nonconformists. Beneath this appearance of American unity, however, lay fault lines that would ultimately fracture in a moment of religious controversy (such as the eventual debate over the rise of deism) or political turmoil (such as the emergence of an imperious Federalism in the early 1790s). As we will see in the [next chapter](#), the eventual challenge of the French Revolution to both the political and religious bases of the coalition would apply enormous pressure to this providential consensus.

Revolutionary providentialism was successful partly because so many diverse groups and individuals could agree upon the immediate goal of American independence. The apparent overlap of many providential projections for America’s future is, in this respect, misleading: Americans did not concur on the exact pattern of their past and their future, but instead applied historical providentialism to the shared goal of independence during the conflict with Britain. If we look carefully, we can see places where an American providential consensus was already unraveling – for example, in the efforts of some clergymen to argue that the abolition of slavery was necessary to secure God’s favor in the Revolutionary War and the great future that had been marked out for the United States.³⁹ But the very real debates in America over the political future of the nation – particularly in the volatile areas of race and citizenship – were largely postponed until after the Peace of Paris, creating an appearance of national unity around the general idea of America’s prospective greatness.

I have been arguing that Patriot orators employed historical providentialism during the American Revolution, a form of providential appeal that emerged in America after the English Civil War but only gained political traction in the difficult years after 1763. Recent historians have instead characterized the religious rhetoric of the Revolution as largely “millennial.”⁴⁰ The distinction is

³⁹ See, for example, Jacob Green, *A Sermon Delivered at Hanover (in New-Jersey), April 22nd 1778* (Chatham: Shepard Kollock, 1779), 16; *Essex Journal*, March 8, 1776, 4–5; *New York Journal*, April 18, 1776, 1; and *New England Chronicle*, November 28, 1776, 1.

⁴⁰ The most famous example is Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

important. As we saw in the [first chapter](#), apocalyptic providentialism bound its users to the schema of Bible prophecy and implied that the momentous drama described therein could be glimpsed in contemporary history. Historical providentialism took a different tack, promising a great destiny for America in a divinely ordained plan for human improvement but avoiding specific references to the end times or the colorful details of Ezekiel and Revelation.

Some Patriots certainly considered whether current events could be fitted within an apocalyptic frame, but there was very little of the explicit and immediate millenarianism that marked the Puritan revolution in England in the seventeenth century. Connecticut preacher Ebenezer Baldwin suggested in 1776 that America's "prosperous state" might coincide with the establishment of Christ's kingdom on earth, but he cautioned that the American Revolution was only "remotely preparing the way for it." (He also relegated this "conjecture" to a footnote in the printed version of his sermon.)⁴¹ Other preachers who foresaw the arrival of the millennium postponed this moment by a century or two, leaving a long period of progressive American development before the inauguration of the end-times sequence.⁴² Would-be users of this language were aware of the constraining effects of apocalyptic providentialism – of the need to map the minutiae of Scripture onto current events – and also of the disdain with which prophetic interpretation was still regarded in Britain and America. Even those who were especially excited about the fulfillment of Bible prophecy advanced their apocalyptic conjectures with caution, or appended their millennial speculations to an immediate historical providentialism.⁴³

Instead of confining themselves within the bounds of biblical prophecy, Revolutionary providentialists developed the notion that God simply intended the future greatness of America. Although this might culminate in Christ's return, it could be more easily described within secular time, following the course of American history through the Puritan founding and the Revolution into an imperial future. The attractions of historical providentialism were evident in the "Book of America," an article that appeared in Patriot newspapers in 1782. Eight years earlier, Boston satirist John Leacock had produced a pastiche of providential rhetoric narrating the conflict between Britain and Massachusetts

1977). See also Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and the discussion in Chapter 2, note 92 and accompanying text. I engage this historiography – and Hatch's concepts of "civil millennialism" and "republican eschatology" – in "The Peculiar Smiles of Heaven': Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1865," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2003, 154–57.

⁴¹ Baldwin, 39–40.

⁴² Timothy Dwight, *A Sermon Preached at Northampton, on the Twenty-Eighth of November, 1781* (Hartford: Nathaniel Patten, 1781), 27; and Ezra Stiles, *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor* (New Haven: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1783), 34–36.

⁴³ For a sense of the equivocation of would-be millenarians, see Charles Turner, *Due Glory to be Given to God* (Boston: T. and J. Fleet, 1783), 29. Turner, a Boston minister, offered the tortured assessment that "[the millennium] does perhaps at this time appear, by several prognostic symptoms, to be in some degree probable."

in the style of the King James Bible, complete with chapters, verses, and archaic language. Although Oliver Cromwell and Cotton Mather made cameo appearances, the narrative focused on events in the recent past.⁴⁴ In 1782 an updated version offered not only a description of the Revolutionary conflict but an account of America's fabulous future:

Now the eyes of the nations of the whole earth were turned towards this chosen land; and it multiplied in people and in wealth, and in beauty abundantly. Every thing which delighteth the heart of man was found here; harmony and love in sweet symphony reigned through the united realms. The oppressed in every land fled here and were happy. The children of America increased & waxed greater and greater, until no man could number them; they are like the stars of Heaven innumerable; their riches are like the hills and mountains.

Seamlessly incorporating recent events with an aggrandized future, the "Book of America" presented both as history, using the past as a guarantor of America's progressive trajectory. In place of the confusing and potentially embarrassing apocalyptic idiom, this historical providentialism confirmed America's great destiny but remained vague about its details.⁴⁵

Opponents

In the fall of 1775, Reverend William Smith of Philadelphia found himself in an extremely uncomfortable position. After his June sermon – in which he praised the "GENIUS OF AMERICA" and noted his "strong and even enthusiastic persuasion, that Heaven has great and gracious purposes towards this continent" – Smith had become a celebrated figure throughout the colonies and a target for abuse among Britons and American loyalists. Unfortunately, this newfound fame rested on the erroneous assumption that he was a staunch supporter of independence. Smith actually harbored doubts about both the desirability and the viability of a complete separation from Britain, and as an employee of the Church of England he had particular reason to worry about the consequences of a revolution. His avid employment of historical providentialism, however, had suggested that his mind was made up.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ For the text and an essay introducing Leacock and his work, see Carla Mulford, ed., *John Leacock's First Book of the American Chronicles of the Times, 1774–1775* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987).

⁴⁵ *Massachusetts Spy*, May 29, 1782, 1. The "Book" was reprinted in the *Boston Gazette* and other Patriot newspapers.

⁴⁶ On Smith's June sermon in Christ Church, Philadelphia, and his subsequent reputation as a strong proponent of American independence, see Chapter 2, notes 115 and 116 and accompanying text. Smith's most recent biographer rejects the idea that he displayed any support for independence, suggesting that the political climate around him changed and made his more modest defense of American liberties seem reactionary: Thomas Firth Jones, *A Pair of Lawn Sleeves* (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1972), 106–12. On Smith's surprise that his sermon might discomfit the episcopate in Britain, see Horace Wemyss Smith, *Life and Correspondence of the Rev. William Smith, D.D.*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: S. A. George & Co., 1879), 1: 519–20.

As Smith grappled with his perplexing celebrity, accepting plaudits and nurturing doubts, his colleague Jacob Duché fell into a similar difficulty.⁴⁷ In the early 1770s, Duché was another Anglican minister in Philadelphia who was gripped with Patriot fervor. A former student of William Smith's at the College of Philadelphia, he struggled to reconcile his attachment to Britain with his sympathy for the American cause.⁴⁸ From 1774, when he became the first chaplain to the Continental Congress, Duché found himself drawn toward historical providentialism and an implicit endorsement of independence. In July 1775 Duché urged a group of Philadelphia soldiers in a sermon to "coolly and deliberately wait for those events which are in the hands of Providence."⁴⁹ In an official fast sermon to Congress two weeks later, Duché narrated the "great and astonishing blessings of Providence, by which these American colonies have been distinguished from their very first settlements to the present period." Britain appeared in Duché's sermon as the enemy of God's plan, the ungrateful nation that, "with merciless and unhallowed hands, wouldst cut down and destroy this BRANCH of thine own VINE, the very BRANCH, which Providence HATH MADE STRONG even FOR THYSELF!" Unsurprisingly, Duché's friends in the Congress – particularly John Hancock – continued to see him as a supporter of their cause. Duché was confirmed as the chaplain of the second Congress and remained in his post until the last months of 1776.⁵⁰

Though harboring major doubts about American independence, Smith and Duché continued to employ a Revolutionary providentialism until 1776. Smith's skepticism eventually emerged in very public circumstances. Asked by Congress to deliver a funeral sermon on the recent death of the American general Richard Montgomery during the ill-fated Quebec campaign, Smith dedicated the first weeks of 1776 to preparing a spectacular procession and a stirring oration to honor the fallen hero. The first endeavor was more successful than the second. After an enormous pageant through the chilly streets of Philadelphia that brought together the city's artisans and political elites, Smith made the mistake of calling in his sermon for the "restoration of the former harmony between Great Britain and these colonies," a sentiment that led John Adams to dismiss the entire sermon as "an insolent performance." Much as the British Parliament had tried to censure Thomas Nowell for his 1772 sermon on the martyrdom of Charles I, Congress refused either to confer its thanks on Smith or to publish his address. Unlike the British example, however, the Philadelphia sermon had

⁴⁷ For a brief biographical sketch of Duché, see Clarke Garrett, "The Spiritual Odyssey of Jacob Duché," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 119, no. 2 (1975): 143–55.

⁴⁸ For a sense of his awkward position, see Duché's *Observations on a Variety of Subjects, Literary, Moral and Religious* (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1774), especially 106–7. This collection of Duché's correspondence with a British friend combined an appreciation for the mother country with visions of "new kingdoms and empires rushing forth from their embryo state" in America.

⁴⁹ Duché, *The Duty of Standing Fast in our Spiritual and Temporal Liberties* (Philadelphia: James Humphreys, 1775), 23.

⁵⁰ Duché, *The American Vine: A Sermon, Preached in Christ Church, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: James Humphreys, 1775), 16, 21.

been delivered before an enormous and attentive audience that included the delegates to Congress. Smith's brief political career continued that spring, as he published articles in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* critiquing *Common Sense* and the drift toward independence. After July he decided to concentrate instead on preserving his position as provost of the College of Philadelphia, but the damage had already been done. The trustees removed him in 1779, and there was little doubt that his Anglican and loyalist leanings were behind the dismissal.⁵¹

Jacob Duché, who had rivaled Smith in providential bombast and cryptology, suffered an even more ignominious fate. Leading the Congress in prayer during the formative months of the Revolution, Duché watched helplessly (and silently) as delegates accepted the logic of independence. Unwilling to endorse the Patriot cause wholeheartedly but fearful of embracing loyalism in the Revolutionary capital, Duché spent most of 1776 and 1777 in a state of nervous despair. Relief came from an unexpected source. On September 26, 1777, the British seized Philadelphia. While Congress and thousands of Patriot supporters fled the city, Duché surrendered himself to British troops. Although the congressional chaplain must have seemed quite a catch to the Redcoats who marched him into custody, British authorities quickly realized the depth of his loyalist sentiments and allowed him to return to his church. Duché immediately restored the old liturgy (which included prayers for the well-being of George III) in place of its Revolutionary substitute and became a loyal supporter of the occupation.⁵²

Two weeks after the capture of the city, Duché even wrote a confidential letter to George Washington, leaning on their former acquaintance and pleading with the general to give up the struggle for independence. Washington had already made one impudent effort to retake the city, with a raid on British forces at Germantown, and Duché was perhaps encouraged to reach out to his former commander in chief by the failure of this attack. In doing so, he telegraphed to his former colleagues that he had switched sides. In place of his earlier rhetoric on the "great and astonishing blessings of Providence" upon America, Duché now urged Washington to join in the "glorious work" of restoring British rule. Washington, with impeccable decorum, passed the treasonous note to Congress unanswered; Congress, with rather less decorum, promptly leaked Duché's letter to the press. His perfidy was reprinted in broadsides and newspapers around the country, hastening his departure for Britain and a fifteen-year exile.⁵³

Duché and Smith present a paradox: how could such enthusiastic proponents of historical providentialism eventually reveal themselves as opponents

⁵¹ Wemyss Smith, 1: 539–62; Jones, 112–13. On the audience for the sermon, see the brief report in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, February 21, 1776, 3.

⁵² Garrett, "The Spiritual Odyssey of Jacob Duché," 146–49.

⁵³ Jacob Duché, *Copy of a Letter from the Rev. Mr. Jacob Duché to General Washington* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1777). Duché concluded his letter by noting that, if he was successful in converting Washington to a renewed loyalism, he would "deem my success the highest temporal favour that Providence could grant me."

of the Patriot cause? To explain this, we need to remember that historical providentialism became politicized only in the decade or so before the Declaration of Independence. In this period, colonists angry with British actions started to define a distinct destiny for an independent America and to write Britain out of this shared providential history. Americans and Britons had originally imagined the future greatness of America within the context of the British Empire. Duché and Smith might still imagine in 1775 that providence had great things in store for America without necessarily urging the colonists to break with Britain. Their mistake, in allowing their language to run ahead of their political sentiments, was to miss the subtle but undeniable shifts in the political meaning of national providentialism in the early 1770s. The popularity of the sermons delivered by both men in 1775 had much to do with a providential separatism that they hardly intended, and the effects of their rhetoric were to confirm a political shift about which they themselves remained profoundly skeptical.

Beyond Duché and Smith, we might expect to find a loyalist version of historical providentialism, or some providential riposte from the many Americans who were skeptical or critical of the Revolution. In fact, no consistent or coherent alternative emerged during the war years. The loyalist press certainly tried to undermine the religious authority of the Revolutionaries – in 1779 the *New York Gazetteer* published a grateful letter to Congress from its putative sponsor, Satan – but the Patriot visions of America's future glory went largely unchallenged.⁵⁴ Some loyalists reproduced the familiar boast that England should actually be credited for the original settlement and the prosperity of its American colonies.⁵⁵ Others gave a fresh airing to the charge that, as in the seventeenth century, the “principles of the independent Presbyterian religion” had brought about all the trouble between the king and his subjects.⁵⁶ Hugh Gainé, the most prominent loyalist printer in America, even published a sermon on the “martyrdom” of Charles I in 1780, hoping that this would find an audience in British-occupied New York.⁵⁷ This sermon labored to compare the current “unnatural Rebellion” to the English Civil War but offered no alternative explanation of what God intended for Britain and America amid the current crisis.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ *New York Gazetteer*, October 20, 1779, 3.

⁵⁵ *New York Gazetteer*, June 29, 1782.

⁵⁶ *New York Gazetteer*, October 7, 1778.

⁵⁷ America had never been a particularly good market for martyrdom tracts, and the presses had produced almost none since Jonathan Mayhew's sensational attack on Charles I in 1750: Jonathan Mayhew, *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers: With Some Reflections on the Resistance made to King Charles I* (Boston: D. Fowle, 1750). On the significance of this sermon in the development of American political theory, see Bernard Bailyn, ed., *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750–1776*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 1: 204–11.

⁵⁸ Charles Inglis, *The Duty of Honouring the King, Explained and Recommended* (New York: Hugh Gainé, 1780), 24.

By invoking Cromwell and the regicide, loyalists hoped to pass off the current troubles as a reprise of religious fanaticism. Myles Cooper, the president of King's College in New York, found himself stuck in England at the outbreak of the Revolution and delivered his loyalist critique of events in America from a pulpit in Oxford. Despite his recent absence from the colonies, he was convinced about the causes of American distemper: "Religion itself, or rather the appearance of it, is humbly ministered as a handmaid to Faction and Sedition." Moreover, it was "well-known" in America "that solemn Prayers, public Fastings, and pathetic Sermons, were some of the most effectual means that were employed to invigorate the Rebellion." Cooper was almost admiring in his assessment of the power of American religious rhetoric, particularly as it had somehow blended religious piety with political treason: "Such arts would almost 'deceive the Elect'; and it is no wonder that they prevailed with the ignorant, the prejudiced and unprincipled, to join with the crafty, the profligate and desperate, in executing the measures of their aspiring Demagogues." But, in spite of Cooper's spirited invocation of this dark episode in English history, loyalists were much better at lamenting providentialism than appropriating it for their own ends.⁵⁹

Perhaps the most notorious, and certainly the most colorful loyalist clergyman was Jonathan Boucher, an Anglican minister who had come to America in 1759 and, after a decade in Virginia (during which he struck up a friendship with George Washington), had become rector of St. Anne's Church in Annapolis.⁶⁰ Maryland was a hotbed of religious dissent, and Boucher (as a representative of the Church of England) devoted much of his time to attacking other denominations. He was especially appalled by the enthusiasm of Baptists and other dissenters for the burgeoning cause of American independence. In 1769 he warned his congregation that "sects in religion, and parties in politics, generally prevail together."⁶¹ Two years later, he predicted that the alliance between political radicalism and religious toleration "may end, as it did in Cromwell's time, with the downfall of the State."⁶² The memory of the "grand

⁵⁹ Myles Cooper, *National Humiliation and Repentance Recommended, and the Causes of the Present Rebellion in America Assigned* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1777), 15.

⁶⁰ Boucher's memoirs, written in exile in England, were published in 1925 as *Reminiscences of an American Loyalist, 1738-1789* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925). Boucher has drawn attention from many historians. Some notable studies include Robert G. Walker, "Jonathan Boucher: Champion of the Minority," *William and Mary Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1945): 3-14; Philip Evanson, "Jonathan Boucher: The Mind of an American Loyalist," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 58, no. 2 (1963): 123-36; and Anne Young Zimmer and Alfred H. Kelly, "Jonathan Boucher: Constitutional Conservative," *Journal of American History* 58, no. 4 (1972): 897-922.

⁶¹ Jonathan Boucher, "On Schisms and Sects," in *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution; in Thirteen Discourses, Preached in North America between the Years 1763 and 1775* (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1797), 46-88, 79.

⁶² Boucher, "On Reducing the Revenue of the Clergy," in *Causes and Consequences*, 222. On Boucher's tendency to see the current struggles between the American colonists and Britain as a reprise of the English Civil War, see James C. Spalding, "Loyalist as Royalist, Patriot as Puritan: The American Revolution as a Repetition of the English Civil Wars," *Church History* 45, no. 3 (1976): 329-40.

rebellion” was everywhere in Boucher’s writing; like other loyalists, however, he struggled to define a rival interpretation of God’s will that might discourage these threatening forms of radicalism. By 1774 Boucher had retreated into an anemic providentialism that was entirely devoid of future prospects: he simply asserted that “God rules over all” and that political perfection “should no more be expected from aggregate bodies, than from individuals.”⁶³

As the residents of Massachusetts stepped up their resistance to Britain during the spring of 1775, Boucher’s neighbors in Maryland plotted their own revolution against their pastor. Confirmed in his paranoia and expecting to be removed forcibly from his post, Boucher continued to preach but took “a pair of pistols” into the pulpit with him. He placed the guns beside his Bible and, with no apparent irony, expounded on the virtue of nonresistance to tyranny.⁶⁴ Like Myles Cooper, Boucher was convinced that American clergymen were responsible for the sudden interest in independence. In his memoirs of 1797, he suggested that anyone who perused the contents of Revolutionary sermons “will cease to wonder that so many people were worked up into such a state of frenzy.” Ironically, the two sermons that he targeted for censure were by William Smith and Jacob Duché.⁶⁵ He had been on good terms with both men, but their 1775 sermons read to him (as they did to so many others) like a clear endorsement of independence. Hence the final irony in Boucher’s miserable American swansong: before he was forced into exile in the fall of 1775, he spent a good portion of his last months in the colonies combating the providentialism-manqué of his Anglican colleagues. His own providential plan, constructed around the uncompromising doctrines of Sir Robert Filmer, equated resistance to tyranny with “resisting the ordinances of God.” In a virtuoso display of providential quietism, Boucher urged that, “however humiliating such acquiescence may seem to men of warm and eager minds, the wisdom of God in having made it our duty is manifest.”⁶⁶ Having lost his audience, Boucher finally took down his pistols and followed his own advice. He dispatched a brief letter to George Washington in August renouncing their former friendship, and on September 20, 1775, he left America for the last time.⁶⁷

Boucher may have been unable to posit a persuasive alternative to historical providentialism, but he hardly forgot about either his American humiliation or the enthusiastic predictions of Revolutionary rhetoric. Marooned in England, and spending the 1780s and 1790s telling anyone who would listen that the downfall of the United States was imminent, Boucher finally published his American sermons in 1797 and took pains to refute the historical providentialism that had anchored the Revolution. In marked contrast to the Patriot

⁶³ Boucher, “On the Character of Ahitophel,” in *Causes and Consequences*, 414, 417.

⁶⁴ Boucher, *Reminiscences*, 113.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 118–19.

⁶⁶ Boucher, “On Civil Liberty; Passive Obedience, and Non-Resistance,” in *Causes and Consequences*, 508. Gordon S. Wood has suggested that Boucher’s recourse to Filmer “was the ultimate symbol of the loyalists’ plight.” Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 161.

⁶⁷ Boucher, *Reminiscences*, 141.

rhetoric he abhorred, he claimed that it was “difficult to form even a plausible conjecture what the destiny of the American States will be: because, first, they have no history of their own; so that, from any thing they have yet done, little can be inferred respecting what they will do.” As if to confirm the importance of this point, Boucher made it repeatedly: “All that they have in their history, that is either ancient or venerable, they have in common with that nation which they have renounced.” Against the numerous boasts of Revolutionary providentialists, who were inclined to trace American greatness and singularity from the Puritan settlements to an empire of vast dimensions, Boucher’s rebuttal was simple: “Merely as Americans, they have no valorous ancestry to boast of, nor any history but of yesterday.”⁶⁸

The fate of Duché and Smith suggests that the loyalists coped poorly with the challenge of American independence, responding only sluggishly to the Patriots’ skillful detachment of America’s providential trajectory from a shared Atlantic history. That both men could employ historical providentialism and yet remain unconvinced by its claims demonstrates that this language was not universally persuasive; but the failure of loyalists to marshal a rival vision of a British-American future, or at least to update Boucher’s (armed) advocacy of nonresistance, suggests the weakness of loyalist arguments and the power of Patriot rhetoric. In the loyalists’ defense, they received very little help from Britain, where a similar crisis over the propriety of Revolutionary providentialism proved no less debilitating.

3. “Pencillers of Providence”: Britain and the Meaning of the Revolution

In spite of the imperial acquisitions of the Seven Years’ War, many Britons lost confidence in their nation’s progress in the 1760s and 1770s. The tenacity of the American colonists, and the failure of British forces to crush the rebellion in 1775 and 1776, encouraged the belief that Britain had passed its zenith and was already in decline. British rhetoric during the American Revolution was fractious and uncertain, enervated by a sense of national misfortune and by the inability of many Britons to affect events across the vast Atlantic. Although a handful of commentators talked up the possibility of a great destiny for Britain in the early years of the war, there is virtually no evidence that Britons developed a revived providential purpose over the course of the fighting. On the contrary, the rhetorical divergence between British and American forms of national providentialism became much more pronounced as Britons struggled to understand the reasons for their nation’s plight.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Boucher, *Causes and Consequences*, lxviii, lxxi, lv.

⁶⁹ Studies pointing to a lack of consensus in Britain regarding the nation’s role in the American war include James E. Bradley, *Popular Politics and the American Revolution in England: Petitions, the Crown, and Public Opinion* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 137–42; Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785*

As war broke out, a few observers attempted simply to dismiss the American threat. Noting that some Britons had endorsed the ideas of imperial transfer and the future greatness of America, a number of newspapers and orations ridiculed the notion that Britain would “sacrifice its Strength and Wealth” to raise a “rival” on another continent and maintained that Britain’s military could easily raze every city in America.⁷⁰ Newspapers followed Jonathan Boucher’s lead in presenting the advocates of American independence as “puritanical republicans” who, in the words of one satirical verse, “All day long the sacred scriptures scan / To make God’s word subservient to their plan.”⁷¹ The campaign to dismiss the American cause altogether reached a climax in the fall of 1775 with a propaganda effort organized by the North ministry. Following George III’s rejection of the Olive Branch Petition in August, local authorities were instructed to organize petitions in support of the king. These were reprinted monotonously in the royal newspaper, the *London Gazette*, but they also prompted many Britons to produce rival petitions in support of the colonists and in opposition to the hard-line policies of the king and his ministers. In several towns, protesters far outnumbered the signatories of the original petitions.⁷²

Even this supportive rhetoric was silent on what God intended through the current conflict with the American colonists. Britons’ collective failure to engage with providentialism prompted one of the most prominent London newspapers to issue an unusual complaint in January 1776. While the presses were “every day teeming with the opinions of my fellow citizens, relative to the convulsions in the state,” these political speculations contained no references to God and his control over events on earth: “Countrymen! Brethren! are our sentiments refined, are our reasonings exalted, till we are too wise, or shamed to confess the operations of providence?”⁷³ The nonconformist minister, Richard Price, went still further in a 1775 tract, comparing the piety and providential attentiveness of the colonists (who had observed regular fast days since 1774) with Britain’s complacency and godlessness:

In this hour of tremendous danger, it would become us to turn our thoughts to heaven. This is what our brethren in the colonies are doing. From one end of *North-America* to the other, they are FASTING and PRAYING. But what are we doing? Shocking thought!

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 237–84; Kevin Phillips, *The Cousins’ Wars: Religion, Politics, and the Triumph of Anglo-America* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 233–68; Stephen Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and H. T. Dickinson, “The Friends of America’: British Sympathy with the American Revolution,” in Michael T. Davis, ed., *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain, 1775–1848* (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 2000), 1–29.

⁷⁰ “A Country Curate,” *American Resistance Indefensible: A Sermon Preached on Friday, December 13, 1776* (London: H. Gardner, n.d.), 18. See also *London Chronicle*, June 29–July 1, 1775, 623. Since Britain proved able to seize nearly every major city in America at one point or another during the conflict, there was some substance to this threat.

⁷¹ *London Chronicle*, January 5–7, 1775, 18; and September 7–10, 1776, 245.

⁷² For discussions of these addresses, see Bradley, 69–77; Colley, 138; and Phillips, 241–44.

⁷³ *London Chronicle*, January 25–27, 1776, 93.

we are ridiculing them as *Fanatics*, and scoffing at religion. – We are running wild after pleasure, and forgetting every thing serious and decent at *Masquerades*. – We are gambling in gaming houses; trafficking for Boroughs; perjuring ourselves at Elections; and selling ourselves for places. – Which side then is Providence likely to favour?⁷⁴

Although Price's sympathies with the colonies earned him censure from the North ministry and its supporters, his call for a national fast was echoed by the popular press and, in December 1776, was accepted by the king himself. George subsequently declared fast days each year until 1781, when the war was effectively lost.⁷⁵

British providentialism appeared in a number of secular contexts throughout the American war, from newspaper articles to parliamentary speeches, but the 150 or so printed fast-day sermons from this period present the most complete perspective on how Britons debated God's involvement in the American Revolution.⁷⁶ The picture that emerges from these sermons is of a nation at once eager to defer to God but unsure about his intentions; with very few exceptions, ministers and orators struggled to project a confident destiny for the nation and frequently slumped into pessimism. Even as George III announced the December 1776 fast in October of that year, newspapers advised ministers to approach the day with caution. The *Scots Magazine* warned ministers that "to pronounce decisively which side is in the right, is not consistent with that humility and self-diffidence that ought to pervade all our thoughts and expressions when we appear before the all-knowing God."⁷⁷ The anxiety that the Americans might be right, and that their historical providentialism enjoyed God's approval, haunted these British fast days and eroded confidence in Britain's future.

The fast days themselves were widely observed in Britain. The London *General Evening Post* reported that, at the official House of Lords sermon on the fast in 1776, "the concourse of people was astonishing." Throughout London and the country more generally, "the day was spent in a manner strictly becoming

⁷⁴ Richard Price, *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America* (London: T. Cadell, 1776), 98.

⁷⁵ For a particularly intemperate response, which held that Price had made "a most fanatical appeal to the future determinations of Providence," see the letter from "MN" in *London Chronicle*, December 12–14, 1776, 573. Note that the *Chronicle* article of January 1776 also culminated in an appeal to George to "proclaim a fast through Britain and America" and to "put a stop to the effusion of thy children's blood." *London Chronicle*, January 25–27, 1776, 93.

⁷⁶ On the fast-day sermons, see Henry P. Ippel, "Blow the Trumpet, Sanctify the Fast," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 44 (1980–81): 43–60; and Ippel, "British Sermons and the American Revolution," *Journal of Religious History* 12, no. 2 (1982): 181–205. For a more general account of the clergy's role during the American Revolution, see Paul Langford, "The English Clergy and the American Revolution," in Eckhart Hellmuth, ed., *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: German Historical Institute of London and Oxford University Press, 1990), 275–307.

⁷⁷ *Scots Magazine* 38, no. 10 (October 1776): 519.

so awful an occasion.”⁷⁸ Ministers from all denominations, however, quickly developed suspicions that the fasting populace was not completely sincere. On the first fast day in December 1776, the service in St. Paul’s, Covent Garden, was interrupted by a “decent dressed man” who stood up in the middle of the sermon and regaled the preacher: “Don’t you tell so many lies in your sermon, Mr. Parson!”⁷⁹ The 1778 fast at St. Paul’s Cathedral was marred by a number of vandals who hid in the church after the service, “burnt two fine prayer books, a gown and a cassock” in the vestry, and made their exit only after they “so intoxicated themselves with some bottles of the sacramental wine, that they left the room in a most shocking, nasty condition.”⁸⁰ Beyond these occasional blemishes, ministers detected a broader popular reluctance to embrace the fast fully. In 1780 the *London Gazetteer* reviewed the recent fast day and complained that “the solemnity of yesterday might be said to be rigidly observed by the *butchers* of London and Westminster,” but that a glance at the shops of the fishmongers might “incline a foreigner, unacquainted with English abstinence, to have supposed the day, instead of a fast, to have been a high festival.”⁸¹

The sense that Britons did not take fasting as seriously as they should permeated many sermons and newspaper articles. Shrewsbury minister Richard de Courcy complained in 1781 that Britons merely offered the “repetition of devotional form” rather than a genuine humiliation before God.⁸² The *London Magazine* remarked in 1780 that fasting was not “fashionable” and consequently struggled to attract popular interest.⁸³ Preachers were inclined to think that a “hypocritical fast” was much worse than no fast at all, in spite of their original enthusiasm for the king’s 1776 declaration: “We had better have the weight of St. Paul’s church or ten thousand millstones fastened to our necks,” warned London minister John Towers in 1778, “and be cast into the sea, than keep such a fast.” The sense that the British public was inviting just such a fate from God remained a mainstay of fast rhetoric throughout the war, particularly as the annual ceremonies appeared to be having no positive effect on the fate of British arms.⁸⁴

Ordinary Britons could be forgiven, perhaps, for their ambivalence: the rhetoric of the fast days (and of providential commentary on the war more generally) was unremittingly bleak, even in the first two years of the war. Dissenting ministers like Richard Price, as well as Anglicans like Richard Watson (the Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge), lamented a nation “once united

⁷⁸ *General Evening Post*, December 12–14, 1776, 4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Gazetteer*, March 2, 1778, 3.

⁸¹ *Gazetteer*, February 5, 1780, 2.

⁸² Richard de Courcy, “An Alarming View of God’s Desolating Judgments,” in de Courcy, *Sermons*, 2nd ed. (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1810), 190–239, at 222.

⁸³ *London Magazine* 49, no. 3 (March 1780): 111–12.

⁸⁴ John Towers, *The Past Mercies, the Great Sinfulness, and the Present, Alarming State of this Nation, a Loud Call to Humble Ourselves Sincerely before God* (London: T. Vallance, 1778), 4–5.

and happy, but now torn to pieces,” and an empire that “now stands tottering on the very edge of ruin.”⁸⁵ The popular press was no more hopeful. The *London Chronicle* lamented the contrast between the glories of the Seven Years’ War and the disaster of the American Revolution, while the *Scots Magazine* noted in astonishment that a nation that seemed “so *tremblingly alive*” in the 1760s now seemed close to death. Britain’s celebrated commercial interests were powerless to lead the nation from its slump: “Even the great commercial and manufacturing bodies, . . . who are generally remarkable for a providential sagacity in whatever regards their interest, seemed now to be sunk in the same carelessness and inattention with the rest of the people.” If Britain had been abandoned by both God and its business elites, the nation was in very serious trouble indeed.⁸⁶

Even before 1775 Britons had explored the ideas of imperial transfer and decline. While 1763 constituted a national apogee, the very extent of the nation’s successes only confirmed how far Britain would eventually fall. This pessimistic thinking was spurred in 1776 not only by the events in America but by the publication of Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The odd coincidence of Gibbon’s first volume and the Declaration of Independence provided a convenient analogy with Britain’s current plight.⁸⁷ In 1780 Thomas Powys, a Northamptonshire MP, even offered the history of the American war and Gibbon’s Roman history as parallel texts explicating the same process: “One might be tempted to imagine, that the aera of Valentinian were terms under which the writer was describing the present administration of Great Britain.”⁸⁸ Motivated by Gibbon’s celebrated history and by the torrent of bad news from America, British ministers plotted the nation’s future on a downward trajectory as precipitous as the upward vector of American providentialism.⁸⁹

Why had God humbled Britain in this way? Most commentators approached this problem from the familiar perspective of judicial providentialism: The

⁸⁵ Richard Price, *Additional Observations on the Nature and Value of Civil Liberty, and the War with America* (London: T. Cadell, 1777), 88; Richard Watson, “The Principles of the Revolution Vindicated, in a Sermon Preached before the University of Cambridge, on Wednesday, May 29, 1776,” in Watson, *Sermons on Political Occasions, and Tracts on Religious Subjects* (Cambridge: J. Archdeacon, 1788), 77; and Watson, “A Sermon Preached Before the University of Cambridge, . . . On Account of the American War, February 4, 1780,” in *Sermons on Political Occasions*, 130.

⁸⁶ *London Chronicle*, May 19–21, 1778, 485; *Scots Magazine* 38, no. 10 (October 1776): 515.

⁸⁷ On the intellectual origins of the idea of decline, see Peter Burke, “Tradition and Experience: The Idea of Decline from Bruni to Gibbon,” *Daedalus* 105, no. 3 (1976): 137–52.

⁸⁸ Powys’s remark was reprinted in *Scots Magazine* 43, appendix (December 1780): 691.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Newcome Cappe, *A Sermon, Preached on the Eighth of February, 1782, A Day of National Humiliation* (York: Wilson, Spence and Mawman, 1795), 9. (Cappe’s assistant preached exactly the same sermon again in 1795, at the onset of another war.) See also the fast sermon delivered to the House of Lords by the bishop of Gloucester, Samuel Hallifax, *A Sermon Preached Before the Lords Spiritual and Temporal* (London: T. Cadell, 1782), 8–9.

American Revolution was God's punishment for British sins. The most obvious of these was neglect of religion, manifested either in the freethinking trends of atheism or deism; or perhaps in a form of political radicalism at home (best evidenced by John Wilkes and his followers) that had forged a dark alliance with religious dissenters like Richard Price.⁹⁰ While this line of attack threatened again to set nonconformists and Anglicans at each other's throats, the two groups found some points of agreement on what was going wrong with Britain. Richard Price attacked not only those worldly Anglican ministers who attended the theater or who seemed to turn a blind eye to the sins of their congregants, but also ordinary Britons who had left "the places of worship almost deserted" during the war. Anglicans and nonconformists could agree on the unprecedented levels of profanity in Britain's cities and on the certain connection between a godless society and a nation that appeared to have been abandoned by God.⁹¹

Beyond the failure of many Britons either to attend church or to discharge their responsibilities as Christians, an excess of vice and luxury and a contempt for the gravity of Britain's situation all presaged national calamity.⁹² Surprisingly, this judicial providentialism rarely touched upon Westminster and Lord North's handling of the war. Instead, sermons and articles focused on the nation's moral malaise, presenting the conflict as effect rather than cause or even dismissing the American situation as irrelevant. A 1776 fast-day sermon to the House of Commons maintained that "we need not cross the ATLANTIC for Sins, to account for our share in the present Troubles."⁹³ A similar sermon in the House of Lords in 1779 passed over "the rebellion in our distant provinces" and dwelt instead upon a matter "of a more serious and alarming nature: . . . the state of religion, and morals, and the character and temper of our people in general."⁹⁴ This act of turning away from either the details or even the entire topic of the American war was remarkably common in British war rhetoric.

The difference of emphasis between British and American versions of national providentialism reflected the very different political contexts in which

⁹⁰ The link between nonconformism and impiety was clearly evident in Robert Pool Finch's 1779 fast-day address: *A Sermon, Preached in the Church of St. Michael, Cornhill* (London: W. Oliver, 1779), 21.

⁹¹ Richard Price, *A Sermon, Delivered to a Congregation of Protestant Dissenters, at Hackney* (London: T. Cadell, 1779), 28. J. C. D. Clark discusses the variety within dissenting religious groupings at this moment in *English Society, 1660–1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics During the Ancien Regime*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 256–300.

⁹² See, for instance, Joshua Toulmin, *The American War Lamented, A Sermon Preached at Taunton* (London: J. Johnson, 1776) 13, 14. See also William Thom, *The Revolt of the Ten Tribes, A Sermon Preached in the Church of Govan, on the Forenoon of the Public Fast* (Glasgow: Robert Chapman and Alexander Duncan, 1778), 44.

⁹³ John Butler, *A Sermon Preached before the Honourable House of Commons* (London: T. Cadell, 1777), 13.

⁹⁴ John Ross, *A Sermon Preached before the Lords Spiritual and Temporal* (London: T. Payne and Son, 1779), 20, 21.

providential rhetoric was produced and consumed. Patriot preachers and orators used historical providentialism to nudge audiences toward the Patriot cause and to convert Patriot onlookers into active participants in the Revolution: one might discharge one's providential responsibility through the payment of taxes, the purchase of government bonds, or even enlistment in the Continental army or the various militias. British audiences for national providentialism, meanwhile, were set apart from the war by the Atlantic Ocean. When British preachers offered their congregations the illusion of control over the American situation, this necessitated the forging of tenuous links between America's distant battles and the struggle to maintain personal virtue in everyday life. In 1779 the Leeds Anglican Miles Atkinson presented a particularly graphic linkage between the distant war and the immediate sinfulness of his congregation:

When you hear of hundreds falling in the field, cut down in the meridian and vigour of life, and hurried with their sins about them into eternity: When you hear of many aching hearts and weeping eyes on their account, of wives who are become widows, and children who are left fatherless and destitute, . . . let each of you reflect, it is sin that whets the sword of the destroyer, and I have sinned against God.

Although few ministers put the equation as viscerally as Atkinson, a judicial providentialism directed at Britain rather than America aimed to close the distance between the American theater, British policy makers, and the lives of ordinary Britons; and to make Britons believe that there was something immediate they could do to improve the parlous situation of the king's forces. As with the war effort itself, this intellectual maneuver depended on such extended lines of supply that its proponents were at a natural disadvantage when compared with their American counterparts.⁹⁵

If judicial providentialism offered some British commentators the chance to get their audiences closer to the war, it may have given others an opportunity to distance themselves from its prudence or morality. Even though many Britons rallied to the king's cause in the months between the battle of Lexington and the Declaration of Independence, a preexisting sense that the Americans' claims were justified reemerged strongly in Britain as the war dragged on. Fast sermonizers, as the *Scots Magazine* had noted in October 1776, were obliged to observe the solemnity of the day and to avoid partisanship in their religious commentary. While this hardly constrained Patriot orators in America, their British counterparts were often content to emphasize the ultimate inscrutability of providence and to evade specific commentary on the war. The bishop of Oxford, in a 1778 fast-day sermon, told the House of Lords that "the great question, of War or Peace, must be considered in another place, and is so involved in the darkness of futurity, that after the wisest discussion of it, we shall have no right to be quite secure."⁹⁶ Others referred to the "secret counsels

⁹⁵ Miles Atkinson, *The Necessity of a National Reformation, A Sermon Occasioned by the Present Critical State of the Nation* (Leeds: John Binns, 1779), 17–18.

⁹⁶ John Butler, *A Sermon Preached before the House of Lords* (London: T. Cadell, 1778), 13.

of providence” and to a divine plan that was “hid from our eyes.”⁹⁷ Even supporters of the North ministry were inclined to retreat in this way, concentrating on the need for moral reformation but avoiding any specific promises about how this sea change in public virtue might affect Britain’s future.

If the idea of providential inscrutability offered Britons an easy way of avoiding political contention, a sense of British decline led some ministers into quietism or even abdication of the national cause. In a sober November 5th sermon in 1778, Caleb Evans, a Baptist clergyman from Bristol, noted that, although the current prospects were “gloomy,” Christians might at least take refuge in the certainty of the life to come. Evans contrasted the “present fluctuating state” of earthly politics with the “peaceful, happy shore” that awaited believers after death, urging his congregation to look for a reward in heaven rather than a dramatic turn in the nation’s political fortunes.⁹⁸ John Newton, the former slave trader and Anglican evangelical, told a London fast-day audience in 1781 that they should “put their trust in God” as an insurance policy against national calamity. While Britons could “hardly be too much alarmed for the nation, but for yourselves you have not just cause of fear.”⁹⁹ Richard Price, whose pessimism toward Britain seemed even to infect his optimism toward America in the final years of the war, told his London congregation in 1781 that “all earthly governments have in them the seeds of decay and dissolution . . . , but that future government in the heavens, under which the virtuous are to be happy, will be subject to no calamitous revolutions.”¹⁰⁰ In the most extreme cases, British national providentialism simply collapsed under the weight of pessimism and the train of bad news from America. Instead of focusing on the dubious prospects of the nation, British commentators encouraged audiences to concentrate on the certainty of that “future government” in heaven.

Although British religious rhetoric during these difficult years was expressed primarily in the terms of judicial providentialism, two prominent ministers attempted more ambitious projections of God’s plan for Britain. One was John Wesley, who remained a staunch Tory in politics in spite of his non-conformist streak.¹⁰¹ Wesley produced pamphlets criticizing both the general drift of the colonists’ actions and their more specific rhetorical claims, ridiculing the idea of a special destiny for America and the suggestion that the

⁹⁷ Richard de Courcy, *National Troubles a proper Ground for National Humiliation* (Shrewsbury: T. Wood, 1776), 75, 10; and John Moore, *A Sermon Preached before the Lords Spiritual and Temporal* (London: J. Robson, 1781), 10, 18.

⁹⁸ Caleb Evans, *The Remembrance of Former Days, A Sermon Preached at Broad-Mead, Bristol* (Bristol: William Pine, 1779), 48.

⁹⁹ John Newton, *The Guilt and Danger of Such a Nation as This* (London: J. Buckland, 1781), 32–33.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Price, *A Discourse Addressed to a Congregation at Hackney* (London: T. Cadell, n.d.), 16.

¹⁰¹ For an overview of Wesley’s wartime activities, see Allan Raymond, “I fear God and honour the King”: John Wesley and the American Revolution,” *Church History* 45, no. 3 (1976): 316–28.

British Empire was close to expiration.¹⁰² In a 1778 sermon, Wesley offered an ambitious interpretation of eighteenth-century Atlantic history. Since 1700, he argued, the American colonies had fallen away from the pure morality of their Puritan founders and had slumped into “Luxury, Sloth and Wantonness.” To make matters worse, they had developed a “Spirit of Independency” that was equally objectionable to God and morality. Although these repugnant phenomena might be cause for despair, Wesley found an ingenious way to link them to the current conflict and to project a happy ending for everyone. God had deliberately encouraged Americans to embrace independence in order to force them into a commercial conflict with Britain. The subsequent crisis would create an economic disaster for America and would dethrone the lazy elites who were behind the Revolution. The moral and political failings of the colonists would be purged, and the mother country would be bound to her colonies more strongly than ever.¹⁰³

God’s plan had already enjoyed notable success, argued Wesley. Nonimportation, the strategy with which Americans had countered the Stamp Act and other British policies since 1763, had reduced many colonists to poverty and had stopped their slide into luxury. (No matter for Wesley that nonimportation had been a conscious choice for colonial leaders, and that this sense of collective sacrifice had been one of the cornerstones of American separatism and self-belief.) Meanwhile, God had maintained “this strange dread of imaginary evils” in the minds of the anxious colonists, in the knowledge that their separatist tendencies would be crushed by Britain. Now Britain’s armies had been dispatched in accordance with the next stage of the providential design: “The Spirit of *Independency* . . . is over-ruled by the Justice and Mercy of God, first to punish those crying sins, and afterwards to heal them. He punishes them by Poverty, coming as an armed man, and over-running the land.” Having demonstrated that God intended to bring “unspeakable Good . . . out of all this evil,” Wesley even found a moment to mock the famous 1776 sermon by John Witherspoon of Princeton: “So does *the fierceness of man*, of the *Americans*, *turn to his praise*, in a very different sense from what Dr. *Witherspoon* supposes.” Whereas most British commentators struggled to respond to Witherspoon’s providential provocation, Wesley met his rival head on. Here was an Anglican version of God’s plan for history that promised the ultimate success of Britain and the speedy defeat of the new United States.¹⁰⁴

The most confident articulation of British national providentialism during the Revolutionary War came in 1778 from Beilby Porteus, bishop of Chester (later bishop of London) and one of the most influential figures in the Anglican Church.¹⁰⁵ The occasion of this address – a Charles I sermon on

¹⁰² See Chapter 2, note 118 and accompanying text.

¹⁰³ John Wesley, *Some Account of the Late Work of God in North-America, in a Sermon on Ezekiel i. 16* (London: R. Hawes, 1778).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 17, 21.

¹⁰⁵ Robert Hodgson, *The Life of the Right Reverend Beilby Porteus* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1811). Porteus’s parents were tobacco planters in Virginia, and moved to England in

January 30th – was an unlikely forum for optimism, but Porteus offered a British version of historical providentialism to rival the numerous American formulations that were currently moving through the presses across the Atlantic. Britons had been “most remarkably favoured with the visible protection of Heaven; and there are in our own history so many plain and unequivocal marks of a divine interference, that if *we* do not acknowledge it, we are either the blindest or the most ungrateful people on earth.” Porteus sketched an unbroken trajectory for English history from the Reformation through the Spanish Armada, the gunpowder plot, and the Glorious Revolution to the present. He even achieved the grail of martyrdom sermonizers, propelling Britain’s providential course across the apparent chasm of the Civil War. While noting that “the murder of a virtuous though misguided prince” might seem to observers to be “utterly inconsistent with the notion of a divine superintendence,” Porteus suggested that an “uninterrupted course of prosperity and success” might actually disadvantage the nation and breed overconfidence or lassitude. That God had allowed the Civil War to happen actually confirmed the “care and kindness of Providence,” which was “no less visible in these salutary severities, than in the distribution of its most valuable blessings.”¹⁰⁶

The conclusion to this grand trajectory was entirely congruent with the Revolutionary providentialism of American Patriots. If Britain had been so carefully protected and favored by God in the past, its inhabitants should approach the future with a measure of confidence:

A series of past favours naturally begets a presumption of their continuance; and it must not be wholly imputed to the laudable partiality which every honest man entertains for his own country, if we give way to a persuasion that God will still vouchsafe his accustomed goodness to this favoured land. . . . Is it then a vain, is it a delusive imagination, that after having been made the choice instruments of Providence for such noble, such beneficial purposes, there is some degree of felicity still in reserve for us, and that the illustrious part we have been appointed to act on the great theatre of the world is not yet accomplished?

Porteus moved beyond Wesley in offering not only an optimistic assessment of Britain’s future, but a fully developed historical providentialism in which Britain would play an “illustrious part” in God’s drama for human salvation. British history was, after all, congruent with a progressive scheme for national greatness. Even though their sentiments were isolated amid a sea of pessimistic British rhetoric, these ministers demonstrated the possibility of a more proactive and upbeat strategy than the judicial providentialism that was more widely evident in Britain during the American war.

How had Wesley and Porteus come upon this more positive assessment of Britain’s providential role? This question is especially interesting given the

1720 partly in the hopes of obtaining a better education for their children. Porteus kept a painting of his parents’ American home on the wall of his office. The king invited Porteus to become bishop of London in 1787.

¹⁰⁶ Beilby Porteus, *A Sermon Preached before the Lords Spiritual and Temporal* (London: T. Payne and Son, 1778), 5, 8, 10–11.

timing of these addresses, coming soon after Britain's calamitous defeat at Saratoga (which would shortly bring France into the war on the side of the United States). Perhaps Porteus, whose earlier addresses gave little indication of this providential optimism, saw unabashed patriotism as a clever vehicle in which to navigate the shoals of January 30th: this would explain the curious omission of any reference to the American war in the sermon, in spite of Porteus's enthusiasm for incorporating British history before 1763 into his progressive providential trajectory. Or perhaps Wesley and Porteus believed that their audiences were in particular need of encouragement, given the widespread impression after Saratoga that the American war was becoming a futile endeavor for Britain.

What we can say is that neither man was able to sustain his historical interpretation for very long or to persuade skeptical Britons to share in this providential optimism. Just a year later, Porteus preached a fast-day sermon contrasting Britain's successes in the Seven Years' War with its current depleted state, concluding with the pessimistic assessment that – absent an immediate and general moral reformation – the current troubles would “probably lead (as in all great empires they have universally led) to final ruin.”¹⁰⁷ Wesley struggled to overturn the impression that events in America had disproved his theory. Even before his 1778 sermon, he had presented the British fast day of December 1776 as a striking success that had produced “a manifest blast” upon the American colonists. The *London Magazine*, impatient with Wesley's relentless prophesying, lamented his partisanship and his poor grasp of current affairs. Unable to find any evidence that the “tide has turned” since the December 13th fast day, the *Magazine* urged Wesley to “name *one* province taken from [the colonists]. Or think he that the inhabitants of England have no knowledge or recollection?” While Porteus quickly bowed to events and reverted to a judicial providentialism, Wesley faced public humiliation as his predictions came to nothing. The *London Magazine* urged his friends “to keep a pen from his fingers,” and, as the war dragged on, Wesley shelved his providential optimism and kept silent about God's intentions.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Porteus, “The Necessity of National Reformation, Preached before the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, on the General Fast,” in Porteus, *Sermons on Several Subjects*, 2 vols. (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1817), 1: 247–67, 254, 263. Porteus never entirely abandoned his hope that Britain might have a role to play in God's providential scheme. His first biographer records Porteus's attempt in late 1800 to present the coincidence of a new century and the Act of Union between Ireland and Great Britain as evidence that 1801 would “bring back to us once more that Divine assistance and protection, which have lately been withdrawn from us.” Hodgson, 157–58. His final sermon, delivered in 1808 when Porteus was seventy-eight years old, made a stronger case for Britain's providential import: in Hodgson's summary, Porteus argued “that this Country might possibly be the chosen instrument in the hand of God to diffuse the light of the Gospel throughout the world, and ultimately to accomplish the great schemes of Providence.” Hodgson, 239–40.

¹⁰⁸ John Wesley, *A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England* (London: J. Fry and Co., 1777), 15; and *London Magazine* 46, no. 3 (March 1777): 159–60. Wesley had already been damaged by the charge that his 1775 pamphlet, *A Calm Address to our American Colonies*, was a plagiarism

Wesley's dilemma – that events in America appeared to contradict his hopes for Britain – was widely shared during the war, and it hardly refuted American claims to providential favor. As successive fast days appeared to have no effect on the nation's sinking fortunes, some British observers even questioned the propriety of the king's actions. In 1778 the *London Gazetteer* criticized George III directly for the "swaggering proclamation" of another fast day, questioning his right to "take this liberty with the stomachs or the consciences of the people," and contesting the providential basis for a British appeal: "And I am not perfectly clear, while on my knees, *praying against*, and *cursing* our brethren, but I might be very profanely and wickedly cursing against those whom God has resolved to bless?"¹⁰⁹ A series of ineffectual fasts suggested that some sins were beyond remedying by the public at large; one clergyman suggested that the king and his ministers look to their own moral conduct or political judgments to explain God's enduring wrath.¹¹⁰

From this suspicion that the "Great Ones" rather than the populace at large were responsible for Britain's downfall, providential commentators fell easily into cynicism. Perhaps the government saw fast commemorations as "a creature of policy" and an "instrument of state to govern that wild beast, the Mob"?¹¹¹ Or perhaps the fasts were intended by the "higher powers" in government merely "to give the colour of religion, to their wicked purposes."¹¹² Newcastle clergyman James Murray, something of a maverick both politically and ecclesiastically, produced an entire book of sermons in 1781 that satirized the political uses of fasting. Murray noted that the "promoters of this fast" were also the architects of "the ruinous war it is intended to support," and that they deferred to God only after "things go wrong through their own folly and wickedness." Given that the proponents of the fast appeared to be seeking "not direction on how to proceed, but strength to follow their own wisdom," Murray argued that God would answer their prayers only with "indignation and abhorrence."¹¹³ Worse, argued the Norwich minister Rees

of Samuel Johnson's pamphlet *Taxation No Tyranny*. Isolated by the course of events, which ran contrary to his predictions, Wesley faded from view: according to Raymond, 327, "the longer the war continued, the less Wesley said about it."

¹⁰⁹ *Gazetteer*, February 19, 1778, 2.

¹¹⁰ George Walker, *A Sermon, Preached to a Congregation of Protestant Dissenters, at Nottingham* (London: J. Johnson, 1778), 1, 4.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹² Rees David, *The Hypocritical Fast, with its Design and Consequences* (Norwich: J. Crouse, 1781), 12.

¹¹³ James Murray, *Sermons for the General Fast Day* (London: J. Adams, 1781), iii, 41–43. Murray (b. 1732) was a Scottish Independent who became a friend of political and religious liberty but a staunch critic of evangelicalism. This placed him on the wrong side of many Scottish churchmen, and he moved to Newcastle upon Tyne in 1764 and remained a minister in that city until his death in 1794. Ironically, his support for the American colonists (which alienated him from many Scottish moderates) brought his political views into line with the same Scottish evangelicals he had earlier decried.

David, God would hold Britain responsible for its actions in America “and make us smart for every drop of innocent blood, which we have shed in this war.”¹¹⁴ For these dissident Britons, fast days had become ominous and fiercely political.

Another form of fatalism, increasingly common as the conflict persisted, redirected attention from Britain’s sins to America’s role in the divine scheme. Even in 1776 Middlesex preacher Ebenezer Radcliff suggested that America had been “marked out as the favourite of Providence,” selected by God as “the seat of a mighty people” and a “rising empire.” Britain could try to suppress or even destroy its errant colonies, but it did so at the substantial risk of opposing God’s higher purposes: “Providence may, for aught we known, have permitted these convulsions to take place, to fulfil some great designs which we cannot comprehend.”¹¹⁵ Radcliff’s caution was echoed by the Dublin historian and clergyman Thomas Leland, who wondered in a December 1776 sermon if God “hath not chosen another people, and another land, to plant his name and worship there.”¹¹⁶ America’s rise seemed directly proportional to Britain’s decline, noted anxious newspapers and ministers. Although one could defend Britain’s actions from a variety of perspectives, the London *Gazetteer* admitted in 1778 the difficulty of squaring recent history with God’s plan: “The very finger of Providence seems hitherto to have thwarted our designs.”¹¹⁷

In the later years of the war, commentators oscillated between dark prognostications of Britain’s collapse and a reluctant acknowledgment of America’s providential significance. The king’s own chaplain, George Horne, conceded in 1781 that “the Almighty is indeed thus teaching us in the School of Affliction at this time,” and he warned that Britons would have to undergo “a severe course of discipline” before any hopes of amelioration.¹¹⁸ That same year, the Unitarian minister Newcome Cappe told his York congregation that “it may be in the purposes of providence, on yon western shores to raise the bulwark of a purer reformation than ever Britain patronized.”¹¹⁹ Some preachers combined both sentiments. In 1778 Edinburgh minister William Thom reprised Oliver Cromwell’s fretful search for the “sin of Achan,” the single mistake that had brought Britain to the brink of destruction. Thom also suggested that the “imprudent steps” taken by Lord North and his predecessors may have enjoyed the imprimatur of providence: God had “permitted” these measures, so that “he might exhibit and hold up that great continent, to the view of all the world, and

¹¹⁴ David, 30.

¹¹⁵ Ebenezer Radcliff, *A Sermon Preached at Walthamstow, December 13, 1776* (London: J. Johnson, 1776), 12, 26.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Leland, *A Sermon, Preached before the University of Dublin, on Friday the 13th of December, 1776* (Dublin: William Hallhead, 1777), 14, 20.

¹¹⁷ *Gazetteer*, January 14, 1778, 2. See also “A Layman,” *The Church an Engine of the State: A Sermon Not Preached on the Late General Fast, 1778* (London: J. Almon, 1778), 6.

¹¹⁸ George Horne, *A Sermon, Preached before the University of Oxford, at St. Mary’s, on Wednesday, Feb. 21, 1781* (Oxford: D. Prince and J. Cooke, 1781), 19–20.

¹¹⁹ Newcome Cappe, *A Sermon, Preached on Wednesday the 21st of February, 1781* (York: A. Ward, 1781), 15.

to aggrandize a rising empire, which the schemes of short-sighted men pretend to crush and annihilate.”¹²⁰ Britons should fear for their own future, even as they should acknowledge America’s divergent destiny.

By 1781 British commentators were loath to salvage anything from the ruined American campaign, save for the sense that God had a controversy with Britain and that the nation’s future was seriously in doubt.¹²¹ Perhaps the most damning verdict came from Samuel Parr, a schoolmaster and curate whose 1781 *Discourse on the Late Fast* was declared by the *Monthly Review* to be “by far the most masterly discourse that hath been published on the occasion.”¹²² Parr styled himself as neither a dissenter nor a political radical, disparaging those who “consider the exaltation of America as inseparable from the depression of their own country.” In searching the recent war for evidence of providential favor, however, he was as starkly pessimistic as Richard Price or any of Lord North’s staunchest critics. “It is folly to think that our efforts can counteract the designs of Providence,” he warned, before encapsulating Britain’s recent conduct and its prospects: “In the past we behold desolation most rapid, most extensive; perhaps irremediable to those who have inflicted it. The present is yet big with difficulty and danger; and over the future is cast one dark, impenetrable veil of uncertainty and horror.” Parr displayed the pessimism of many Britons in the face of the recent conflict, but also articulated an antitype to the historical providentialism that had sustained Revolutionary America. While American Patriots looked at the past for evidence of divine assistance, faced the present with confidence and courage, and anticipated a glorious future for their nation, Britons could find no escape from their anxieties.¹²³

Perhaps the only crumb of comfort for Britons in these terrible events was, ironically, the success of their former colonists. As we saw in the [previous chapter](#), a number of British commentators argued before the war that because a transatlantic transfer of power was inevitable, George III and his ministers should craft a policy that might preserve British interests while acknowledging America’s eventual preeminence. As late as 1778, an article printed in English and Scottish magazines suggested that Britain might still recognize the course of providence: “Who doth not see that one uniform design hath been gradually rising towards completion for more than two hundred years past in America, which is at this present hour as it were in the throes of birth?” God hoped

¹²⁰ William Thom, *Achan’s Trespass, in the Accursed Thing, Considered* (Edinburgh: John Robertson, 1779), 41. Thom had been closely involved in schemes to encourage Scottish emigration to America in the 1770s.

¹²¹ See, for instance, Cappe, *A Sermon Preached on the Eighth of February, 1782*, 6; and John Disney, *A Sermon, Preached in the Parish Church of Swinderby, in the County of Lincoln* (London: J. Johnson, 1782), 9.

¹²² *Monthly Review* 65, no. 4 (October 1781): 319.

¹²³ Phileleutherus Norfolciensis (Samuel Parr), *A Discourse on the Late Fast* (London: J. Dodsley and H. Payne, 1781), 29, 30. In spite of his carefully crafted moderation in his 1781 *Discourse*, Parr gradually embraced quite radical positions on public education, child labor, the abolition of the slave trade, and the French Revolution.

“to sway the minds of the leading men on the one side and the other” and to end the conflict without further bloodshed: George III and his ministers had simply to recognize American independence: “With what lustre shall their names be enrolled in the annals of futurity, who shall act as the pencillers of Providence in delineating, proportioning, and adjusting, with harmony, beauty and strength, this new and vast body of empire!”¹²⁴ In 1778 it still seemed possible that Britain might accept its providential fate with dignity and grace, earning a reputation for itself as an instrument of providence rather than an obstacle to God’s American plan.

Although this argument was hardly likely to sway Britain’s leaders, who clung to the belief that they could crush the rebellion, it appealed to religious and political dissenters who had originally warned the government that America would prevail. Richard Price, who had been ridiculed by newspapers and pamphleteers for expressing this view in 1775, earned an apology six years later from the *Monthly Review* of London, along with the acknowledgment that “what *was* speculation, is now a *fact*.”¹²⁵ Price and other nonconformist ministers could provide little succor as they viewed Britain’s political future, but they urged their congregations to “look across the *Atlantic*” and to hope that America’s empire might succeed where Britain had failed.¹²⁶ Perhaps even the bold universalism of Patriot rhetoric was correct, and God intended the American victory for “the promotion of the general good of Mankind”? If so, argued Cambridge minister Richard Watson, Britons should recognize even God’s harsh treatment of their nation “to be wise and good.”¹²⁷ The outcome of the American Revolution, for these British boosters, was not simply a more vigorous and promising nationalism that could eclipse Britain’s tired governance, but a genuine universalism that should excite the friends of liberty around the world. This could, perhaps, comfort the losers as well as the winners of the Revolutionary War.

Conclusion: Thanksgiving 1783/1784

After many long years of warfare, Americans at last celebrated their victory in 1783. Britons, who had lagged behind America in the providential

¹²⁴ *London Chronicle*, February 14–17, 1778, 165; *Scots Magazine* 40, no. 2 (February 1778): 61–62.

¹²⁵ The *Monthly Review* admitted in 1781 that the course of events had demonstrated the truth of Price’s 1775 *Observations on Civil Liberty*, at least inasmuch as that tract pertained to American independence: Price’s ideas “were ridiculed when they were first published, as the dreams of a splenetic visionary; or execrated as the malignant effusions of a heart that only wished what it pretended to foresee. But however divided the world may be about Dr. Price’s motives, there is something which all must agree in; what *was* speculation, is now a *fact*.” *Monthly Review* 64, no. 4 (April 1781): 316.

¹²⁶ Price, *A Sermon Delivered to a Congregation of Protestant Dissenters*, 12, 17. See also Cappe, *A Sermon, Preached on Wednesday the 21st of February, 1781*, 15.

¹²⁷ Watson, “A Sermon Preached before the University of Cambridge,” 135.

interpretation of the Revolution, waited until June 1784 to give thanks to God for the survival of their nation. Because the historical providentialism that had characterized Patriot rhetoric since the first months of the conflict now seemed fully vindicated, it was ubiquitous in the celebrations of American independence. George Washington's final address as commander in chief described America's citizens as "actors on a most conspicuous theatre, which seems to be peculiarly designated by Providence, for the display of human greatness and felicity." As Washington traveled back to his home in Virginia in the final weeks of 1783, he responded to the plaudits of legislatures, town committees, and private individuals with providential deference: "For me," he told an audience in Trenton that showered him with praise, "it is enough to have seen the Divine Arm visibly outstretched for our deliverance, and to have received the approbation of my country and my conscience, on account of my humble instrumentality in carrying the designs of Providence into effect."¹²⁸

Other Americans were even more ambitious. The *Boston Gazette* argued that American independence would force every other country in the world to treat its citizens with respect.¹²⁹ One Massachusetts minister claimed that "every wheel of Providence seems to be now in motion to hasten the downfall of tyranny."¹³⁰ Ezra Stiles, the president of Yale, saw knowledge and power pouring into America and "being here digested and carried to the highest perfection." When this process was complete, knowledge would "reblaze back from America to Europe, Asia and Africa, and illumine the world with truth and liberty."¹³¹ If many Revolutionary orators had conceived their visions of American greatness as a means of bolstering public confidence during the darker days of the war, the astonishing success of the Patriot cause now seemed to underwrite still more elaborate promises for the future.

In Britain, meanwhile, a handful of preachers tried to reinterpret the conflict as a lucky escape for the nation, suggesting that the eventual alliance of the United States, France, and Spain made Britain's mere survival as a nation seem like a deliverance.¹³² Most of the British thanksgiving sermons adopted a much more somber tone. William Keate, an Anglican minister from Somerset, denied that he wanted "to aggravate the distresses of my country, nor to lower us in our own estimation." The bleak situation in which Britons found

¹²⁸ *Maryland Journal*, July 22, 1783, 1; and December 26, 1783, 1. Washington's farewell speeches, delivered along the route of his journey to Mount Vernon, are collected in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, 39 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), 27: 259–89.

¹²⁹ *Boston Gazette*, October 13, 1783, 1.

¹³⁰ David Tappan, *A Discourse Delivered at the Third Parish in Newbury, on the First of May, 1783* (Salem: Samuel Hall, 1783), 12.

¹³¹ Stiles, 52.

¹³² See, for example, George Pretyma, *A Sermon Preached before the Honourable House of Commons, at St. Margaret's, Westminster, on Thursday, July 19, 1784* (London: B. White, 1784); and Edward Smallwell, *A Sermon Preached before the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, in the Abbey Church, Westminster, on Thursday, July 30, 1784* (Oxford: J. and J. Fletcher, 1784).

themselves, however – in which they might “live to see revolutions still more dreadful” – rendered any attempt to disguise reality as “criminal, and little less than treason.” Keate hoped that a national reformation might be possible, but he thought Britain’s complete collapse was equally likely.¹³³ Thomas Scott, delivering a thanksgiving sermon in Northampton, glimpsed the same gloomy future for the nation: “God spares us a little longer. If reformation takes place, we shall be preserved. Otherwise, our doom is not far off.” If Britain had any reason to give thanks, it was for a slim hope of national survival rather than any glorious imperial prospect.¹³⁴

Unsurprisingly, the loss of the American colonies prompted Britons either to revamp or to abandon their visions of empire. Opponents of the North ministry had kept up a barrage of criticism not only over its handling of America but over the reported predations of the East India Company in South Asia. Gilbert Wakefield, a dissenting minister who had become an outspoken critic of the slave trade, suggested in a Richmond sermon that God’s apparent abandonment of Britain was entirely justifiable given Britain’s betrayal of its civilizing mission: “Have we navigated and conquered to save, to civilize, and to instruct; or to oppress, to plunder, and to destroy? Let INDIA and AFRICA give the Answer to these Questions.”¹³⁵ Richard Watson, in another echo of American rhetoric, even imagined that Britain might suffer from the flipside of America’s universalizing of the principles of liberty: “I wish I could consider our acquisitions in Asia as compensating our losses in America; but they have been obtained, I fear, by unjust force, and on that account . . . it requires little political sagacity to foretell, that the natives will pay their tribute with reluctance.” Just as in America, Watson predicted, Britain’s control over these areas would eventually be eroded by local resistance and European rivals, ensuring that Asia would become “another America to this nation.”¹³⁶ No wonder that some clergymen found a silver lining in the American humiliation: Britain might function more effectively when shorn of its imperial holdings. Perhaps, one suggested, God had created mountains, rivers, and oceans to deter nations from creating empires in the first place.¹³⁷

¹³³ William Keate, *A Sermon Preached upon the Occasion of the General Thanksgiving, for the Late Peace, July 29th, 1784* (Bath: S. Hazard, 1784), 23, 19.

¹³⁴ Thomas Scott, *A Thanksgiving Sermon, Preached July 29, 1784, at the Parish Church of Olney, Bucks* (Northampton: Thomas Dicey, 1784), 25.

¹³⁵ Gilbert Wakefield, *A Sermon Preached at Richmond in Surry on July 29th 1784, the Day Appointed for a General Thanksgiving on Account of the Peace* (London: J. Johnson, 1784), 16.

¹³⁶ Richard Watson, “A Sermon, Preached before the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, January 30, 1784,” in Watson, *Sermons on Political Occasions*, 158–59.

¹³⁷ Andrew Burnaby, *A Sermon, Preached in Greenwich Church, on Thursday, July 29, 1784, the Day Appointed for a National Thanksgiving* (London: T. Payne, 1784), 14. On British debate surrounding empire in the wake of the American Revolution, see P. J. Marshall, “Britain without America – a Second Empire?” in Marshall, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 2: *The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 576–96.

The most acrid thanksgiving address, delivered by the Presbyterian reformer George Walker to his Nottingham congregation, expressed amazement that the king and his advisers had declared a day of national thanksgiving “in the very bosom of suffering”:

We have no victories to proclaim, no triumph over our old implacable foe, no addition of territory, of wealth, of commerce, to our beloved country; but all is a sad tale of ruined armies, humbled fleets, empire lost, sinking commerce, dissipated treasure, oppressive taxes, factious politics, with every symptom of national decline.

Walker recognized the hand of providence in all this and even offered the bold suggestion that Britain had been given a special mission by God in the recent conflict. This mission was not to spread liberty or to cultivate an empire, but to give birth to the nation that would achieve these lofty goals: “We were, therefore, selected by Providence, to be the founder of a new people, who are to give a new face to the other half of the world.” Britons had been “upheld and favoured by Providence, though not solely, yet ultimately to cherish this new nation of Britons in the other world.” America had triumphed not because of Britain’s rulers but in spite of them, and so Walker had no patience for George III’s efforts to present Britain’s abject defeat as a moment of providential escape. Britons could, however, take solace in a resurgent national providentialism, providing they did so vicariously.¹³⁸

In truth, both the wild optimism of Revolutionary providentialism and the bottomless pessimism of its fractured British analogue were caricatures. America faced many more problems than its providential boosters admitted, and Britain retained both its commercial strength and its political stability. The tendency of national providentialism, however, was to exaggerate both success and failure. Just as the achievement of American empire and the universal spread of liberty appeared secure in the minds of Patriot orators, so the defeat at Yorktown suggested to many Britons that their nation was doomed to expire. The first British empire was eventually supplanted by a second, belying (or at least postponing) Richard Watson’s bleak prognosis and, in the second half of the nineteenth century, restoring a sense of higher purpose to British nationalism. But the idiom and ceremonies of national providentialism were largely absent from British public life in subsequent decades.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ George Walker, *The Doctrine of a Providence, Illustrated and Applied in a Sermon, Preached to a Congregation of Protestant Dissenters, at Nottingham, July 29, 1784* (London: J. Johnson, 1784), 23–24, 34–35.

¹³⁹ Paul Langford has described the collapse in providential confidence in the period after 1783: “The debilitating wars of survival that continued until 1815 did eventually confirm the patriotic self-esteem of Britons. They did not at the time, however, lend credence to a vision of manifest destiny conducting Britannia unrivalled to the leading place among the nations.” Paul Langford, “Introduction: Time and Space,” in Langford, ed., *The Eighteenth Century*, Short Oxford History of the British Isles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1–32, at 11.

Fast days and thanksgiving sermons continued into the nineteenth century, but they were very infrequently printed by the time of Britain's triumph over Napoleonic France in 1815. Before then, the providential hopes of British dissenters, who had seen in the American Revolution the first shoots of a global political reformation, were crushed by the aftermath of the French Revolution. The American War of 1812 – a messy reprise of the Revolutionary conflict – gave Britons little reason either to revive their own imperial destiny or to marvel at the power and beneficence of the United States. The segue between the arguments that supported the first British empire and the rhetoric that underpinned the second awaits careful historical analysis. For now, we can say with some certainty that British efforts to construct a historical providentialism, and to thread a single divine purpose through the numerous twists and turns of British history, were seriously compromised by the American Revolution.

The proponents of historical providentialism in America, on the other hand, had constructed a political coalition that was more fragile than its rhetoric suggested. The consensus around the Patriot cause masked deep religious and political fault lines in the new nation. Even in the 1770s, the problem of slavery was sufficiently discomfiting to give providential pause to enthusiastic Patriots. Those early critics – who declared that God would revoke the nation's bright destiny if the United States held Africans in bondage – were temporarily silenced at the war's end. Ezra Stiles, in his thanksgiving sermon of 1783, suggested that providence would take care of this problem in due course: "We are increasing with great rapidity; and the *Indians*, as well as the millions of *Africans* in America, are decreasing *as rapidly*. Both left to themselves, in this way diminishing, may gradually vanish; and thus an unrighteous SLAVERY may at length, in God's good providence, be abolished."¹⁴⁰ But relying on providence to resolve America's racial diversity was wishful thinking; as one Patriot had claimed of the Revolutionary cause, "the works of providence are done by means."¹⁴¹ In spite of the hopes of Stiles and others, the issues of citizenship and slavery in the United States would not be determined by God but contested bitterly over the succeeding decades. In these acrimonious arguments over race and belonging, the language of providentialism would divide Americans as surely as it had united them during the Revolution. These battles would threaten the idea of American history as unbroken and progressive upon which historical providentialism – if not the Patriot cause more generally – had been founded.

Those caught between Britain and America, the loyalists and agnostics who had sided with the king or who had failed to embrace independence, received little from either nation for their pains. William Smith, who had harbored dreams of presiding over his own college in his adopted home, was briefly restored to the College of Philadelphia when it reopened in 1789, but he was again sidelined when the college merged with the University of Pennsylvania two

¹⁴⁰ Stiles, 14.

¹⁴¹ See note 33 and accompanying text.

years later. When he died in relative obscurity in May 1803, Philadelphians had to be reminded by Benjamin Rush that Smith had once, however briefly, been a champion of Revolutionary providentialism. Jonathan Boucher, who had defended his loyalist pulpit in Maryland with unusual zeal, entered exile in England only to find his Filmerian views to be out of step with the nation he had served from such a vast distance. Britain's prospects continued to seem dire. Boucher published his American sermons in London in 1797, in the midst of Napoleon's advances through Europe. Reasoning that Britain's hopes of survival were slim enough to justify another imperial transfer, Boucher proposed that the empire be relocated on the "peninsula of India" where, "undisturbed by republican projects, so abhorrent to the genius of Asia, we should need no alliance." Boucher's only apparent indulgence in this grim book was a dedication on the title page to George Washington, whose efforts to distance the United States from the French Revolution (inseparable, for Boucher, from its American predecessor) seemed to confirm that Boucher had been right all along.¹⁴²

Jacob Duché, finally, was a brokenhearted refugee from his church and his friends in Philadelphia. Another letter to George Washington in 1783, this time begging for a safe return to his old city and his old job, met with a polite but firm rejection. If Duché found some measure of peace in the years left to him, it came from his embrace of the theories of Emmanuel Swedenborg, the charismatic guru who argued that God would found his New Jerusalem not in the grand theater of geopolitics but through the spiritual redemption of every believer. In 1785 Duché wrote to his mother-in-law that he had been "too much engaged" in the "worldly Contention" of the American Revolution. "How little and contemptible the Politics of a foolish world," he averred: "Look henceforward for an *Internal Millennium*."¹⁴³ Duché's bitterness and his refuge in mysticism attest to the double-edged nature of Revolutionary providentialism. Not all of its advocates foresaw its political implications, and its British opponents had finally either to take vicarious pleasure in its success or to lament the fate of their own nation. Duché's shift toward self-contemplation, however, conferred upon him an unwitting prescience. As Americans would discover in the coming decades, it was easier to internalize a state of divine favor than to project it across a continent or around the world.

¹⁴² Boucher, *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution*, lxxxii–lxxxiii, iii–v.

¹⁴³ Garrett, "The Spiritual Odyssey of Jacob Duché," 149–52. See also Garrett, "Swedenborg and the Mystical Enlightenment in Late Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45, no. 1 (1984): 67–81. Garrett, 81, notes that since Duché's millennium was spiritual, he was "spared the disappointment literal millenarians faced when events did not work out as expected and when the miraculous culmination of history did not take place."

PART TWO

PROVIDENCE, RACE, AND THE LIMITS
OF REVOLUTION

“Our Glorious Example”

The Limits of Revolutionary Providentialism

When Richard Price first argued that America would eclipse Britain and that the American Revolution would “begin a new *æra* in the annals of mankind,” many of his compatriots responded to the prediction with incredulity.¹ In 1776 Lord North’s government, eager to tamp down such unhelpful commentary on the American war, commissioned the historian Adam Ferguson to refute Price’s views. Ferguson was a sound choice for the task. His 1767 *Essay on the History of Civil Society* had firmly established human agency rather than providential design as the engine of history, and Ferguson was dismissive of Price’s claims that America would redeem the world.² He acknowledged that the rebellious colonists had “extravagant plans” for a “Continental Republic” but predicted a collapse into a military dictatorship rather than Price’s “new *æra*” for humanity. The idea that Britain was “to be sacrificed to America” made no sense to a nonprovidential historian: why would anyone abandon the British nation, “which has attained high measures of national felicity, for one that is yet only in expectation?” While Price envisaged American expansion and continental ambition as a natural consequence of historical providentialism, Ferguson had no faith in America’s future progress and saw no reason to forsake Britain.³

After Yorktown, Price’s elaborate projections appeared to have triumphed over Ferguson’s skepticism. British commentators reluctantly conceded that the American war had vindicated Price’s views, and some even acknowledged that the United States was destined for greatness. Price, in excited correspondence with his friends across the Atlantic, dutifully expected the next stage in the providential plan: the universalizing of America’s triumph over Britain. In 1783 he told Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia that the Revolution marked “a new

¹ Richard Price, *Additional Observations on the Nature and Value of Civil Liberty, and the War with America* (London: T. Cadell, 1777), 87.

² Adam Ferguson, *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh: A. Kincaid & J. Bell, 1767).

³ [Ferguson], *Remarks on a Pamphlet Lately Published by Dr. Price, intituled Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* (London: T. Cadell, 1776), 59.

opening in human affairs which may prove an introduction to times of more light and liberty and virtue than have been yet known." The following year he assured the governor of Connecticut, Jonathan Trumbull, that the United States would "give a new direction to the affairs of the world." The entire North American continent would be settled and Christianized; American influence would reshape European politics, bringing revolutionary principles and liberties to the troubled nations of the Old World.⁴

The decades following the Peace of Paris afforded Americans a bewildering mix of opportunities and anxieties, all of which bore upon Price's determination to maintain the upward trajectory of the United States from its colonial and Revolutionary past into a glorious future. Before 1783 the Patriot cause had presented Americans with a simple political objective that might easily be harnessed to the language of historical providentialism: God had always intended the United States to be independent, he had assigned the new nation a major role in the redemption of the world beyond the thirteen colonies, and he had conditioned America's arc of national purpose – from the Puritan settlements to a global altruism – on Patriot resolve against Britain. After 1783 this loose consensus over American historical providentialism was assailed on three fronts. First, a number of difficult debates within the United States – from the ratification of the Constitution to the proper mode of economic activity in the expanding nation – upset the shared purpose that had prevailed during the Revolution. Second, Americans argued bitterly over the extent and character of their influence beyond the borders of the United States, especially as Europe descended once more into political chaos and armed conflict. Third, the persistence of blacks and Indians forced whites to consider what role, if any, God had assigned to nonwhites in his redemptive scheme for America.

The French Revolution was the touchstone for two of these challenges to the providential consensus around American independence. Although Americans were united in their excitement at the storming of the Bastille and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, France's subsequent journey through regicide, irreligion, and Napoleonic rule was a catalyst for political conflict at home. Democratic-Republican societies formed in the 1790s to defend the spirit and the prospects of the French Revolution, while a conservative rump within George Washington's first cabinet created a Federalist Party that adamantly opposed French "perversions" of political and religious order. Americans tended after 1794 to view European events through highly partisan lenses, even as both political parties claimed to be the only legitimate representatives of the American Revolution and, by extension, the standard-bearers for America's providential destiny.⁵

⁴ D. O. Thomas and Bernard Peach, eds., *The Correspondence of Richard Price*, 3 vols. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983–94), 2: 185, 233.

⁵ On the fissure between Federalists and Republicans, see, inter alia, Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788–1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and James Roger Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

Federalists and Republicans often interpreted the events in France in providential terms and pondered the relationship between the political upheavals of 1776 and 1789. The chronological proximity of revolutions in America and in France – as well as some overlap of personnel and ideology between the two – initially persuaded both Federalists and Republicans of the logic of Richard Price’s original arguments: the United States had been designed by God not only to redeem the vast American continent but to “prove an introduction to a better state of human affairs” in Europe and elsewhere.⁶ The souring of the French Revolution after 1793 presented problems to both groups of American observers. While France descended into violence and autocracy, Republicans struggled to fit the French Revolution within a providential scheme of political reform that had begun in America. Federalists, meanwhile, had to explain why France had failed to emulate the United States, and why American influence had been so limited (or corrosive). An ocean away from these turbulent events but intrigued by their relevance to the divine plan, American observers placed enormous pressure upon the providential consensus that had prevailed before 1783. In the process, they discovered the limits of both their political experiment and their ability to determine God’s will in human affairs.

In the three decades between the Peace of Paris and the War of 1812, Americans contested these issues in congressional debates, pamphlet wars, and in the bitter rivalry between highly politicized and partisan newspapers.⁷ Perhaps the most interesting venue for political and providential speculation, however, was the annual commemoration of American independence on July 4th. The day-long celebrations in towns across the nation included prayers, speeches, merrymaking, and a great deal of drinking. The centerpiece of the day was an oration delivered by an invited guest, usually a prominent member of the local community, narrating America’s favored history and its happy future. During the war with Britain, these orations unanimously affirmed a bright destiny for the new nation and reassured Americans that the conflict would end happily for the United States. After 1783 the political purpose of the orations was less clear. Most orators continued to present America’s past as singularly favored but also to look toward the future of the republic and to describe what Americans should do to consolidate their happy destiny. Independence Day orators were therefore obliged to incorporate current events into a longer view of divine assistance and to reckon them against God’s plan for the nation.⁸

⁶ Richard Price to Benjamin Rush, July 22, 1785, in Thomas and Peach, eds., 2: 294. On the Democratic-Republican societies, see Matthew Schoenbachler, “Republicanism in the Age of Democratic Revolution: The Democratic-Republican Societies of the 1790s,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 18, no. 1 (1998): 237–61.

⁷ See, for instance, Jeffrey L. Pasley, *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001); and Richard Rosenfeld, *American Aurora: A Democratic-Republican Returns* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997).

⁸ On the Independence Day celebrations, see Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rights of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); and David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American*

Around four hundred Independence Day orations were printed between 1778 and 1815.⁹ Virtually all of these speeches were delivered by white men drawn from the professional ranks: lawyers, doctors, merchants, politicians, clergymen, and so on. Printed orations were more numerous in the North than in the middle states or the South and West, although there are enough orations from outside of New England to allow for an interpretation of the continuities and discontinuities of this “national” rhetoric in these parts of the union. These orations undeniably embody the thinking of a privileged few, but the audiences they attracted were much more varied. Throughout the country, women and men, laborers and artisans, assembled with local dignitaries and plutocrats to hear these speeches (although social discrimination may have been more likely afterward, in the arrangement of the feasting and drinking). Their public nature transformed these independence orations from the political expressions of America’s elite into broadly affirmed declarations of national identity and purpose.¹⁰

Boston orator William Hull offered a fine summary of the purposes of Independence Day orations in a 1788 address, suggesting that “every patriotic mind” would be eager “to celebrate this great event – to review the causes which have given rise to it – to consider the present situation of our publick affairs – and to contemplate the future prospects of our country.”¹¹ In Hull’s formula, we can trace the outline of the historical providentialism that sustained Patriots during the American Revolution. Independence Day orations internalized the idea that God had supported America in the past and that he intended the United States to realize a grand destiny in the future. At the same time, the obligation on the part of orators to engage with the present nudged Federalists away from the automatic assumption that America was destined for greatness. As they started to lose support in the late 1790s and were then cast into the political wilderness after 1800, Federalists abandoned historical providentialism altogether and offered a much bleaker view of God’s plan for America. Although Republicans eventually forged a new providential compromise with their opponents, the political fissures and pessimism evident in the rhetoric of Independence Day suggest that historical providentialism was not the only way to imagine the future of the early republic.¹²

Nationalism, 1776–1820 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1997).

⁹ Although this number represents only a fraction of the total, the printed orations offer a range of political views that suggests they are broadly representative of independence rhetoric in the early republic.

¹⁰ On the social setting of these speeches, see Travers, 31–68.

¹¹ Hull, *An Oration, Delivered to the Society of the Cincinnati, in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, July 4 1788* (Boston: Benjamin Russell, 1788), 3.

¹² Historians of Independence Day celebrations have disagreed on their political valences. Len Travers has argued that these orations enabled Americans “to mask disturbing ambiguities and contradictions in the new republic, overlaying real social and political conflict with a conceptual veneer of shared ideology and elemental harmony”; Travers, 7. David Waldstreicher offers a more complex picture, identifying a genuinely American nationalism not so much in the formal orations as in the struggles over the right to articulate such a nationalism. Michael Kammen

I. Providence, Reform, and Revolution: 1786–1796

In the years immediately following the victory over Britain, Independence Day orators continued to affirm God's great plans for America. But there was no easy agreement on the political course that would speed these plans to fruition. Two orations from 1786 bear out this problem. Jonathan Austin, a banker who had attained celebrity during the Revolution for his daring diplomatic missions to Europe, told Boston's Faneuil Hall that Americans, "from our earliest infancy to the present hour," had been "led through every changing scene as the peculiar favourites of heaven." Because it would be "base ingratitude" to forfeit the grand destiny offered to the United States by God, Austin enjoined his audience to "encourage *manufactures*," to avoid the "arms of Britain," and to embrace a complete self-sufficiency from Europe. Austin not only reminded Americans of their glorious past but complemented his own suggestions on political economy and foreign relations with the widely held notion that God would continue to favor America.¹³

On the same afternoon, Congregational minister Enos Hitchcock addressed an audience in Rhode Island on the same themes of destiny and political responsibility. Hitchcock, a chaplain during the Revolutionary War, followed Austin in identifying the "many and surprizing interpositions of divine Providence" in American history. He also argued that the providential boon promised by God was conditional on human action in the present: "These blessings are now proffered to America – it is with her to realize or reject the heaven-born gift." Hitchcock, though, saw America's future in farming and commerce rather than industry and self-sufficiency. If Americans would only draw upon their "inexhaustible" resources and "open every avenue to commerce," they might "anticipate with utmost certainty, the future grandeur and magnificence of America." As Austin laid out one model of national development, Hitchcock defined a rather different course; and yet each man yoked his political and economic vision to God's putative plan for national greatness. How were Patriots to choose between them?¹⁴

The possibilities evident in this kind of rhetoric are obvious. By folding political prescriptions into the widely accepted notion of a providential plan for America, orators could offer spectacular incentives for political actions in the here and now and allay fears about pursuing one course rather than another. The problems were commensurately grand. How could one argue that partisan political objectives were divinely sanctioned, particularly if the recommended goal was not achieved or if a "providential" political course resulted

offers the most direct evocation of a strongly partisan aspect to independence celebrations in his *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

¹³ Jonathan Austin, *An Oration, Delivered July 4, 1786, At the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston* (Boston: Peter Edes, 1786), 13, 15–16.

¹⁴ Enos Hitchcock, *A Discourse on the Causes of National Prosperity, Illustrated by Ancient and Modern History, Exemplified in the Late American Revolution* (Providence, R.I.: Bennett Wheeler, 1786), 12, 16–17, 23.

in an undesirable or even a disastrous outcome? Orators had conditioned Revolutionary providentialism upon the patriotic actions of ordinary Americans and had been on the right side of history, despite some setbacks, in their claims that God intended the United States to achieve its independence. The turbulent political events in Europe after 1789, by presenting a more challenging interpretive problem to the authors of independence orations, would threaten the integrity of providential claims for America.

The Constitution: "The Object of Divine Patronage"

The first major post-Revolutionary event to be folded into these independence orations was the formation and ratification of the federal Constitution, a process that lasted from the Constitutional Convention of the summer of 1787 to the ratification by New York a year later.¹⁵ Even though there was substantial opposition across the nation to the proposals that emerged from the convention, Independence Day orations in 1787 and 1788 overwhelmingly urged Americans to support the Constitution. Historical providentialism offered these orators a powerful rhetorical weapon. While a loose coalition of Anti-Federalists opposed the Constitution from a variety of perspectives, its supporters presented the document as the next stage in God's plan for America. These orators absorbed the new structure of government into a longer American history, protecting the Constitution from continued protests by its numerous and vocal opponents.

In 1787, even as the Constitutional Convention debated the terms of the new government in Philadelphia, July 4th orators in New England and New York anticipated a document that would solve America's problems and perhaps reestablish the United States on its providential course. Robert Livingston, the chancellor of New York State, told his local chapter of the Society of the Cincinnati that America could overcome its recent "debility" only with a strong constitution. Moreover, as Livingston attempted to "pierce the veil of futurity" and glimpse America's destiny, he saw alternately grand or disastrous views depending on whether his contemporaries had the sense to adopt a stronger form of government.¹⁶ On the same day, New Haven attorney David Daggett reminded

¹⁵ Rhode Island and North Carolina had effectively rejected the Constitution by the summer of 1788, failing either to call a ratifying convention (in the case of Rhode Island) or to push through the crucial vote on the Constitution (in North Carolina). The Constitution went into effect with the ratification of the ninth state, New Hampshire, on June 21, 1788; but it was the narrow Federalist victories in Virginia on June 25 (89–79) and New York on July 26 (30–27) that ensured that the new national government would be viable. The combination of Federalist success across the nation, and the proposal of a Bill of Rights by the first Congress, enabled Federalists in North Carolina and Rhode Island to secure ratification in November 1789 and May 1790 respectively.

¹⁶ Robert R. Livingston, *An Oration Delivered before the Society of the Cincinnati* (New York: Francis Childs, 1787), 15, 17. Livingston played a central role in two of the most iconic national moments in the history of the early republic: he administered the oath of office to George Washington during the first presidential inauguration in April 1789 and negotiated the Louisiana Purchase with Napoleon as minister to France in 1803.

those in his audience that “the whole history of this country destines it for future greatness” and urged them to consider the “millions yet unborn” who would celebrate the adoption of a stronger constitution. America’s independence could be maintained and gloriously expanded in the future, “if rightly improved” in the present.¹⁷ This notion was deployed widely that year. The United States had only to “improve the gratuities of providence” through remaking its government and it would be assured of future happiness.¹⁸

Not every pitch for popular approval of the Constitution was made in providential terms. In a 1788 pamphlet urging South Carolinians to vote for ratification, David Ramsay, an enthusiastic proponent of historical providentialism during the Revolution, focused on political details (especially the relationship between the federal government and the states) rather than the Constitution’s providential imprimatur.¹⁹ Ramsay was a member of the legislature and also participated in the special convention that gathered in Charleston in May 1788 to consider the Constitution.²⁰ Perhaps realizing that the job of promoting federal union would continue even after South Carolina’s Anti-Federalists had been defeated, Ramsay kept his more flamboyant words for the celebrations that followed South Carolina’s decision to ratify. As soon as the Constitution had been approved, he took up familiar themes in a public oration in Charleston. The drafters had undertaken a “God-like work,” and “Heaven smiled on their deliberations.” Now the way was cleared for America to expand across the continent, extending “one comprehensive system of liberty” from “the Atlantic to the Mississippi, and from the lakes of Canada to the river St. Mary.” Imagining a series of new western states, Ramsay offered a vista of the future through the eyes of “a child born on this day,” who would live to see an aggrandized America comprising “fifty millions of freemen.” Ramsay heaped praise on the Constitution and promised that Americans would enjoy “as great a share of happiness, as any nation has hitherto enjoyed.”²¹

¹⁷ David Daggett, *An Oration, Pronounced in the Brick Meeting-House, in the City of New-Haven, on the Fourth of July, 1787* (New Haven: T. and S. Green, 1787), 15, 21–22, 24.

¹⁸ Thomas Dawes Jr., *An Oration, Delivered July 4, 1787, At the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston* (Boston: Samuel Hall, 1787), 18. See also James Campbell, *An Oration, in Commemoration of the Independence of the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Prichard and Hall, 1787).

¹⁹ David Ramsay, *Address to the Freemen of South-Carolina, on the Subject of the Federal Constitution* (Charleston: Bowen and Co., 1788). Ramsay did not address directly the most contentious topic of all, the threat posed by a stronger federal government to the slave system of the South. Partly this reflects Ramsay’s own ambivalence toward slavery. A transplanted Philadelphian, Ramsay came into ownership of slaves through his marriages to South Carolina widows and tempered his original opposition to the institution accordingly. See Arthur H. Shaffer, *To Be An American: David Ramsay and the Making of the American Consciousness* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 172–79.

²⁰ Robert L. Brunhouse, “David Ramsay on the Ratification of the Constitution in South Carolina, 1787–1788,” *Journal of Southern History* 9, no. 4 (1943): 549–55.

²¹ David Ramsay, *An Oration, Prepared for Delivery before the Inhabitants of Charleston, Assembled on the 27th May 1788, To Celebrate the Adoption of the New Constitution by South Carolina* (Charleston: Bowen and Co., 1788), 9–10, 12.

Ramsay was hardly alone in arguing that God had inspired the Constitution and that the new government was intended to secure the providential destiny to which America had always been entitled.²² But his oration suggests the usefulness of providential language even after the Constitution had been ratified. The Federalists succeeded in the ratification effort thanks to clever argument and, occasionally, unscrupulous political tactics: the Constitution's supporters arranged the timetable for voting on its approval and employed a number of tricks to maximize support for ratification among ordinary Americans.²³ This meant that, after ratification, the Constitution continued to be viewed with suspicion by many Americans.²⁴

Ramsay and other orators used providential arguments to suggest that the Constitution had always been a part of God's plan for the nation. If the national conversation over ratification had been contentious, and sometimes rancorous, the effect of these orations was to suggest that the outcome had hardly been in doubt. In Rhode Island, one of only two states to hold out against ratification by the summer of 1788, Enos Hitchcock used his Independence Day address that year to argue for the divine origins of the new Constitution. (His oration celebrated both "the anniversary of American independence and . . . the accession of nine states to the federal constitution.") Having narrated the providential history of the Revolution, Hitchcock presented the post-1783 period as the moment at which the new United States lost its way. Financial constraints and "divided politics" had brought Americans to the brink of disaster. The "tottering fabric of their union shook from its foundation," Hitchcock theatrically claimed, "and threatened the very existence of empire." But Americans need not have worried. "The liberties of America are the object of divine patronage – a

²² See, for example, William Pierce, *An Oration, Delivered at Christ Church, Savannah, on the 4th July, 1788* (Savannah, Ga.: James Johnston, 1788), 8, 9.

²³ Historians have elaborated on the many ways in which the ratification process failed to reflect the popular will in the states. The proratification forces succeeded in creating special ratifying conventions in each state, rather than relying on the existing (and often Anti-Federalist) state legislatures; the process of ratification was accelerated in ways that disadvantaged the Anti-Federalists and favored the better-organized proratification forces; and many Anti-Federalist delegates (who had been elected to ratifying conventions in the popular expectation that they would reject the Constitution) eventually voted for ratification. See Saul Cornell, *The Other Founders: Anti-Federalism and the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788–1828* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1999), 19–50.

²⁴ On the precariousness of support for the Constitution in Massachusetts (and the consequent risks to ratification in Virginia and New York), see Richard D. Brown, "Shays's Rebellion and the Ratification of the Federal Constitution in Massachusetts," in Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter II, eds., *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1987), 113–27. The ratification votes in Massachusetts, New York, and Virginia were extremely close, even after an intense and well-funded lobbying effort by Federalist forces. The supporters of the Constitution in South Carolina, on the other hand, delivered a big majority – 142 in favor, 73 opposed – when their ratifying convention moved to a vote in May 1788.

guardian God protects them – This intervening cloud, which spread darkness and distress over our land, was a prelude to a brighter day.”²⁵

Hitchcock’s strategy was simple and effective: if Americans broadly agreed that the war with Britain had been directed by God, he had simply to include the Constitution in the process of providential nation building. “Independence was but a part of the revolution,” he told his audience. He conceded that Americans experienced “many difficulties” after 1783 in “erecting the superstructure” of their new political system; after all, many nations were unable to solve the problem of stable government “even after ages of efforts and misery.” But now the Constitution had emerged, and “the blessings of a free government . . . are granted by divine providence, to the confederating States after a few years struggle.” Here was an elegant formula that acknowledged the difficulties of both the Confederation period and the ratification debate, but which affixed the Constitution to the Revolution in a single providential episode. The following year in Philadelphia, the Presbyterian minister Ashbel Green went a step further by arguing that even the public debate over ratification had been directed by God: “We bless thee that thou didst give wisdom and unanimity to our counsellors, to frame and adopt a righteous and energetic system of government; and that thou hast inclined the people of these United States to ratify and establish it.”²⁶ By 1789, those people who had opposed the Constitution were thus on the wrong side not only of the popular verdict, as expressed through the ratification process, but of God’s plan for America.

The Anti-Federalists, rather like the loyalists in the American Revolution, though aware of these providential arguments, were unwilling or unable either to refute or to harness them. Anti-Federalists were vexed by the canny tactics of their opponents, complaining frequently of their “misguided zeal” and of a campaign “to prevent a fair and unbiased examination of a subject of infinite importance to this people and their posterity.” The pamphleteer Brutus engaged directly with the question of the Constitution’s providential significance. In October 1787 he protested Federalist claims “that society, in this favoured land, will fast advance to the highest point of perfection.” Placing the Constitution as the pivot between a happy and a clouded destiny, Federalists had promised a “golden age” for Americans if they cast their votes for ratification. But what if the Constitution incubated tyranny rather than liberty? Then “this only remaining asylum for liberty will be shut up, and posterity will execrate your memory.”²⁷

²⁵ Enos Hitchcock, *An Oration Delivered July 3, 1788, at the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Providence, in Celebration of the Anniversary of American Independence, and of the Accession of Nine States to the Federal Constitution* (Providence, R.I.: Bennett Wheeler, 1788), 10.

²⁶ Ibid. Ashbel Green in William Rogers, *An Oration, Delivered July 4, 1789* (Philadelphia: T. Dobson, 1789), 28.

²⁷ Herbert J. Storing and Murray Dry, eds., *The Anti-Federalist: Writings by Opponents of the Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 66, 109. On Anti-Federalism more generally, see Cornell, *The Other Founders*. The identity of the Anti-Federalist pamphleteers is

Brutus may have challenged the Federalist efforts to add the Constitution to the divine plan for America, but his approach was conservative and uncertain. For Brutus, the possibility of a golden age in the future was hardly likely; looking to the past, he observed that “History furnishes no example of a free republic, any thing like the extent of the United States.” While the proponents of historical providentialism drew upon both the successes of American expansion to date and the imperial possibilities of the North American continent, Brutus looked to the ultimate collapse of Greece and Rome and urged Americans to set their horizons more modestly. In this respect as in so many others, the Anti-Federalist challenge struggled to gain traction against the “restless ardor” of its Federalist opponent. Although the two sides debated the makeup and powers of the proposed federal government in close detail, the Anti-Federalists were largely unable to harness providentialism to their cause.²⁸

There was some disagreement between the Constitution’s boosters over how, exactly, Americans were to “improve” providence. For some, mere ratification of the document would set America on the course to greatness. Others suggested the need for public virtue, or even insisted on citizens’ participation in a grand plan of American expansion.²⁹ The Independence Day orators were in agreement, though, on the desirability of the Constitution from a providential as well as a political standpoint, and in the years following 1789 they downplayed the contingencies of the ratification debate as they inserted the Constitution into a divine scheme of American history. In the process, they wore down the resistance of those who had originally opposed ratification and presented the federal constitution as a crucial stepping-stone to the achievement of America’s auspicious destiny.

France: “A Season of Universal Freedom”

As the new federal government in New York settled into its operations in the summer of 1789, news of the French Revolution reached America. Throughout the War of Independence, Patriot orators had alluded to the global dimensions of the American struggle against Britain. Perhaps America would serve as a

still the subject of intense debate among historians. Herbert Storing and others have suggested that the Federal Farmer was Richard Henry Lee of Virginia; Cornell, 315, suggests Melancthon Smith of New York, but he concedes that the identities of the Farmer and Brutus are still open questions.

²⁸ Storing and Dry, eds., 113.

²⁹ For an example of an oration that premised America’s great destiny on mere ratification of the Constitution, see Dawes, *An Oration, Delivered July 4, 1787*. On the need for public virtue to secure this destiny, see Ramsay, *An Oration, Prepared for Delivery before the Inhabitants of Charleston, Assembled on the 27th May 1788, To Celebrate the Adoption of the New Constitution by South Carolina*. On the supposed need for American expansion, see David Humphreys, “An Oration on the Political Situation of the United States of America in the Year 1789, Pronounced before the State Society of the Cincinnati of Connecticut, at New-Haven, in Celebration of the Thirteenth Anniversary of Independence,” in Humphreys, *The Miscellaneous Works of Colonel Humphreys* (New York: Hodge, Allen, and Campbell, 1790), 332–348; and Samuel Stillman, *An Oration, Delivered July 4th, 1789* (Boston: B. Edes and Son, 1789).

refuge for the poor and dissident of Europe, and the “spark of liberty” would jump from the New World to the Old inspiring a series of parallel revolutions. The news from France suggested that this more expansive view was correct: America would spread its influence by remaking governments and societies in its own image. At a moment when the Constitution appeared to have consolidated the revolution at home, Americans could look beyond their borders in the hope that the United States might be an instrument in the world’s redemption.

The lure of the French Revolution lay as much in its congruence with oft-stated American ideas of liberty as in the tangible benefits it might extend to the impoverished French populace.³⁰ Antimonarchical ideas were extremely popular in America, and, in spite of Louis XVI’s assistance to the Patriot cause in the Revolutionary War, even American elites could take pride in the apparent migration of liberty to the streets of Paris. This was particularly true in the first years of the French Revolution, as the moderate National Assembly pushed for a constitutional monarchy.³¹ The publication of Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* in the United States in 1791 formed a crucial link between the continuing French struggle and its avid American audience. Paine’s personal involvement in the French effort, and his ability to unify the reading publics of France, Britain, and the United States around another incendiary pamphlet, did much to suggest that Americans were in the vanguard of an international revolution.³²

Independence Day orators from all sides of the political spectrum were extremely supportive of the French Revolution in its early years. The events in France appeared to confirm that America was, after all, cosmically significant. A Philadelphia orator in 1791 boasted that “the most brilliant imagination cannot form a point of human greatness which the United States may not attain.”³³ Still more wondrous was the prospect that every other country might emulate America’s example. Orators anatomized the process by which France had followed the United States. One even suggested that the French had “learned the invaluable lesson of liberty in the American war,” an ingenious discharging of America’s debts to France during the Revolution.³⁴ The pattern of these early addresses was uniform: orators praised the French Revolution, claimed that it had been spurred by the American victory over the British, and (more or less explicitly) named God as its primary agent. In addition, they looked to what orators hailed as “a season of universal freedom,” a period in which “the Old

³⁰ For a brief summary of this thinking, see Sharp, 70–72.

³¹ On this first phase, see Elkins and McKittrick, 309–10.

³² Note also the use of the American Revolution by French radicals as a referent for their own political project: Joyce Appleby, “America as a Model for the Radical French Reformers of 1789,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1971): 267–86.

³³ Robert Porter, *An Oration, To Commemorate the Independence of the United States of North-America* (Philadelphia: T. Dobson, 1791), 17–18.

³⁴ Theodore Dwight, *An Oration, Spoken Before the Society of the Cincinnati, of the State of Connecticut, Met in Hartford, on the 4th of July, 1791* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1792), 11.

World bids fair to be regenerated by the New.”³⁵ The French Revolution indicated the successful passage of American liberties across the Atlantic but also heralded a reformation of politics that would encompass the globe.

In addition to being early enthusiasts for the French Revolution, American observers were remarkably slow to turn against it. Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke began their famous debate over the wisdom and propriety of events in France as early as 1790, with the publication of Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution* and the attendant collapse of the two men’s friendship.³⁶ In the summer of 1791, news leaked out to the French people that Louis XVI had begun plotting against the revolutionary leaders who had included him in France’s new constitutional arrangement. The General Assembly eventually decided to pardon the king, but the public was so outraged at both his treachery and the assembly’s lenient response that they lost faith in both; and the Revolution began to spiral out of control. In 1792 France was invaded by Prussian troops, and the liberal revolutionaries who had been patient with Louis were replaced by more extreme forces (including the Montagnards under Marat and Robespierre). They repelled the Prussian invasion and executed the king, and by the autumn of 1793 France had succumbed to the Terror, a maelstrom of factional fighting in which revolutionary ideas mixed with vicious repression. Robespierre, the public face of the new Committee on Public Safety that perpetrated some of the worst excesses of the period, proclaimed his belief in individual freedom even as he stressed the need to eliminate his political opponents.³⁷

Americans were fully aware that events in France had taken a confusing turn in 1793 and 1794, but they clung to the idea that the French Revolution was both providentially significant and inspired by America’s important example. The young John Quincy Adams was a frequent commentator on French events, producing anonymous newspaper articles in Boston that attempted to reconcile the divergent views of Paine and Burke.³⁸ By July 4, 1793, as news of more political turbulence in France reached America, Adams declined the opportunity to distance the United States from the Revolution as he delivered Boston’s Faneuil Hall oration.³⁹ Adams blurred the details of French discord and reassured his

³⁵ Dwight, 18; Porter, 21. See also William King Atkinson, *An Oration, Delivered at Dover, New-Hampshire, on the Fourth of July 1791* (Dover: E. Ladd, 1791), 16, 21; and Thomas Crafts Jr., *An Oration, Pronounced July 4th, 1791, At the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston* (Boston: Benjamin Russell, 1791), 13.

³⁶ Paine narrated the breakdown of his friendship with Burke in the preface to *The Rights of Man* (London: J. S. Jordan, 1791), vii–x.

³⁷ For an overview of events in France during this period, see François Furet, *Revolutionary France, 1770–1880*, trans. Antonia Nevill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 101–26.

³⁸ Adams’s articles were published under the pseudonym Publicola in the Boston newspaper the *Columbian Sentinel* in the summer of 1791; for an early collected edition, see Publicola, *Observations on Paine’s Rights of Man* (Edinburgh: J. Dickson, 1792). Adams kept the secret of authorship very closely, and the letters were widely attributed to his father, John Adams.

³⁹ The audience, at least, was not aware of the diplomatic blunders of Edmond Charles Genet, the French minister to the United States, who had arrived in April 1793 and who had failed to harness his warm welcome from the American people to the achievement of his political

audience that God's plan for the political redemption of the world was very much on track. Acknowledging the present "commotion" in Europe, Adams suggested that "[w]hatever issue may be destined by the will of Heaven to await the termination of the present European commotions, the system of feudal absurdity has received an irrecoverable wound, and every symptom indicates its approaching dissolution." The French Revolution had followed naturally and inevitably from the bright display of political principles in the preceding American struggle. In spite of any momentary obstacles or complications in Europe, "the seeds of Liberty are plentifully sown," and the "long-expected aera of human felicity . . . shall commence its splendid progress."⁴⁰

For the next two years, independence orations from across the country echoed Adams's contention that Americans might still expect the eventual triumph of France, and the "visions of bliss" that would accompany it.⁴¹ At first, the news from across the Atlantic became still more desperate, as Robespierre attacked Christianity in addition to his political rivals. Some orators, unable to deny the obvious difficulties and backward steps of the French, insisted that the troubles in France would eventually become comprehensible in the grander scheme of providence. A refusal to admit that Americans might have been wrong about European events produced strained attempts to prop up the providential design. An especially ardent supporter of the French cause was Samuel Miller, a Presbyterian minister closely involved in the growing Democratic-Republican societies of New York City. Giving the Independence Day oration before an audience of laborers and artisans in 1793, Miller noted that the splendid prospects for France were "not altogether unclouded" but claimed that God might yet use Robespierre and the other tyrants for a greater good: "People may be acting in the light of christian principles, though they know it not."⁴²

goals. Genet later became the focus of Federalist attacks on French intrigue and arrogance, but Jefferson ensured that his conduct remained largely unknown to the American public until later in the year. For an account of Genet's activities, see Sharp, 78–84.

⁴⁰ John Quincy Adams, *An Oration, Pronounced July 4th, 1793, at the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston* (Boston: Benjamin Edes & Son, 1793), 19, 21.

⁴¹ See, for example, Samuel Worcester, *An Oration, Delivered at the College Chapel, Hanover, on the Anniversary of American Independence* (Hanover, N.H.: Dunham and True, 1795), 8, 9, 11; William Jones, *An Oration, Pronounced at Concord, The Fourth of July, 1794* (Concord, Mass.: Nathaniel Coverly, 1794), 19; John McKnight, *God the Author of Promotion: A Sermon Preached in the New Presbyterian Church, New-York, on the 4th July, 1794* (New York: William Durell, 1794), 15; and Morgan J. Rhees, *An Oration, Delivered at Greenville, Head-Quarters of the Western Army, North West of the Ohio* (Philadelphia: Lang and Ustick, 1795), 3.

⁴² Samuel Miller, *Christianity The Grand Source, and the Surest Basis, of Political Liberty: A Sermon, Preached in New-York, July 4th, 1793* (New York: Thomas Greenleaf, 1793), 31–34. Miller hoped that some of the reports of French distemper – especially in religious matters – might have been "totally groundless," the canards of Federalists eager to discredit the supporters of the Revolution in the United States. *Ibid.*, 34. See also Enos Hitchcock's 1793 declaration along the same lines: "As rational beings, and as Christians, we should recollect, that from partial evil, it is the glory of the Supreme Ruler to bring forth general good." *An Oration, In Commemoration of the INDEPENDENCE of the United States of America* (Providence, R.I.: J. Carter, 1793), 14.

In 1795, before the same audience, he acknowledged the “destructive conflict” in Europe but maintained his belief that “all these things are designed to banish tyranny from the earth.”⁴³ Miller’s method was to share the unsettling evidence of “irreligion and vice” with his audience but also to suggest that God intended to bring the Revolution to a triumphant conclusion and that the very cause of the French revolutionaries, the “natural rights of men,” would ensure that religion was ultimately respected.

Before 1793 Americans on both sides of the growing political divide saw the French Revolution in a positive light, postponing or withholding their anxieties about the political instability that had replaced Louis XVI’s repressive rule. After the execution of the king in January 1793, American commentators continued to hope that the course of events would eventually vindicate the Revolution, even as evidence pointed to the opposite conclusion. The zeal with which Americans embraced the French cause compounded their difficulties as the Revolution spun off in unexpected directions. Should orators struggle to adapt their scheme to unfavorable events, as Samuel Miller had done? Or should they acknowledge that their original projections of God’s plan for France had been mistaken? The continuing train of bad news from France, combined with a growing political tension within the new United States, ultimately splintered the consensus of American onlookers and set independence orators against each other as they searched for a national lesson amid the turmoil of Europe.

2. Confounded Expectations: 1796–1808

Given France’s persistent difficulties after 1789, the zeal with which Americans tied their own destiny to the prospects of the French Revolution is surprising. The explanation for this resides, once again, in the tentative and uncertain nature of American independence. While the happy outcome of the war with Britain persuaded ordinary Americans of their providential importance and influence, the French Revolution promised not only to aggrandize the Patriots’ achievement but to assuage some pressing anxieties about the durability of American independence. After 1763 Britons worried that their moment of political preeminence would be short-lived. Drawing on theories of imperial decline and the cyclical nature of history, or upon an idea of *translatio imperii* that held that power and learning were moving slowly westward, many Britons viewed the emergence of the United States with a grim resignation. After 1783 Americans faced the same predicament. Would they embrace a military dictatorship, as Adam Ferguson had predicted in 1776? Or would they retreat into the arms of Britain? By the late 1780s even Richard Price struggled to maintain his optimism, informing his American correspondents of a widespread feeling

⁴³ Samuel Miller, *A Sermon, Delivered in the New Presbyterian Church, New York, July Fourth, 1795* (New York: Thomas Greenleaf, 1795), 22, 31.

in London that the United States was “falling to pieces” and that Americans “will soon repent your independence.”⁴⁴

Price hoped in January 1787 that the United States would still be “an example to the world” but acknowledged that the new nation was foundering upon “seas of blunders.”⁴⁵ At this critical moment, the French Revolution seemed to confirm that America had been right all along. Instead of sinking into chaos or withdrawing to the protection of its colonial parent, the United States had successfully exported its revolution to Britain’s closest neighbor. American orators displayed a great sense of relief at this, stressing that the events in France – when added to the American example – refuted prevailing ideas about national decline. A 1791 Independence Day oration from Worcester identified France as “giving us occasion to alter many articles in our political creed.”⁴⁶ Another oration delivered on the same day in Boston praised Americans for “our glorious example” and suggested that the United States would now influence numerous nations “who have for ages languished under the galling yoke of despotism.”⁴⁷ In place of the old cyclical theory of history, American orators used France to strengthen their claims for historical providentialism. America’s charmed existence to date could be projected upward into the future; moreover, this providential boon would benefit the peoples of Europe and the rest of the world as well as Americans themselves.

The French Revolution became an important crutch for American historical providentialism in the early 1790s: Enos Hitchcock noted in 1793 that “as Americans, we must either renounce that which is our boast and glory, or warmly wish success to the great principles of the French revolution.”⁴⁸ But a variety of pressures soon undermined these hopes. In April 1793 French ambassador Edmond Genet embarked upon a tour of the United States that was intended to consolidate American support for France. He left his home country at a particularly parlous moment: the king had just been guillotined, and France had declared war on its political opponents, Holland and Britain. A desperate Genet appealed directly to the American public to support the French cause, but in so doing he offended a number of prominent Cabinet members (including Hamilton, John Adams, and Washington himself) who valued America’s neutrality and who saw Genet’s populism as dangerous and disrespectful. While Genet received a warm welcome from the crowds on his travels, his demagoguery allowed Federalists to present him as devious and arrogant. This dismissive view was hardly shared by all Americans, and the Federalist campaign against Genet encouraged the formation of the numerous

⁴⁴ Richard Price to Benjamin Rush, January 26, 1787, in Thomas and Peach, eds., 3: 115–16.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Edward Bangs, *An Oration, Delivered at Worcester, on the Fourth of July, 1791* (Worcester, Mass.: Isaiah Thomas, 1791), 14–15.

⁴⁷ Crafts, 3.

⁴⁸ Hitchcock, *An Oration, In Commemoration of the INDEPENDENCE of the United States of America*, 14.

Democratic-Republican societies that would morph into a political party by the end of the 1790s. But after 1793, sympathy for the French cause had become a distinct political position within the United States, a point of division rather than solidarity between American observers.⁴⁹

In the political sphere, support for France eventually came into conflict with two cherished Federalist objectives: the need to preserve neutrality and protect American shipping, and the hope that Britain's political and economic systems might provide a model for stabilizing the fledgling United States. When these objectives were threatened both by Genet's actions and by the worsening situation in Europe, the Federalists began to retreat from the French cause even as the emerging Democratic-Republicans maintained their support. A parallel fissure developed over religion. American ministers uniformly welcomed the French Revolution in its early days, but they struggled to sustain their support as the revolutionaries assailed not only Catholicism but the very foundation of Christian belief. An enduring suspicion of figures like Thomas Paine (especially among the older denominations of New England) hardened into contempt after the publication of the first part of Paine's *Age of Reason* in 1794. Paine argued that Christianity was a terrible error and that political freedom necessarily implied the liberation of ordinary people from religious beliefs and churchmen. While Paine's book was wildly popular on American college campuses and among some Democratic-Republicans, for political conservatives it confirmed a long-standing suspicion: an excess of liberty led inexorably to atheism, political chaos, and national collapse.⁵⁰

By 1795 political and religious developments had placed too great a cost on the maintenance of a providential consensus toward France. But the gravity of European events deterred observers in the United States from simply ignoring what was happening and limiting their horizons to the American continent. One South Carolina minister noted in a 1796 Independence Day oration that, although Americans "must wish to draw a veil over the mournful scenes" in France, they could not do so without ignoring the clear directions of "an all-wise and overruling providence." For this observer, the lesson was obvious: God intended the anarchy in France to "impress on our minds, more forcibly than all the precepts of moralists, the dire effects of the prostration of religion,

⁴⁹ On the influence of Genet, see Elkins and McKittrick, 354–73. Sharp, 138–84, argues for a broad sense of political crisis surrounding the 1796 election, a brief lull while both Federalists and Republicans made some efforts at unity, and then a swift resumption of partisan hostilities in 1797.

⁵⁰ On the eventual disillusion of many clergymen with the French Revolution, see Gary B. Nash, "The American Clergy and the French Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1965): 392–412; and Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 252–77. The *Age of Reason* moved through eight American editions in 1794, seven in 1795, and two in 1796. A recent biographer of Paine has described demand for the book in the United States as "feverish." John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), 396.

government and law.”⁵¹ Other orators drew more explicit lessons from France’s example and found conflicting providential implications for America amid the ruins of the French Revolution. The ensuing debate, which persisted for almost two decades, produced unprecedented disputes over God’s plan for the United States, as well as the first domestic challenge to the idea that America was destined for greatness.

Federalist orators approached the problem of France from two rather different perspectives. A more optimistic view held that the excesses and outrages of the French Revolution confirmed the achievement of the United States. That France had squandered its opportunity to follow in America’s footsteps merely proved that liberty was “an instrument, too delicate for a clumsy performer.”⁵² Others were more explicit about America’s value in the era of Napoleon, reverting to an exceptionalism that defined the United States as God’s only favorite among nations. Noah Webster, who had already charted a separate lexicographical course for the United States with the publication of his first spelling book in 1783, told an Independence Day audience in 1798 that “America alone” had been “reserved by Heaven for the theatre of important events.” While social and political “tempests” would continue to rack Europe, the United States was a “sequestered region” in which virtue and learning could flourish.⁵³

Webster’s bright outlook may have reflected the fact that, until 1800, Federalists still held power in the new republic. But after 1795, the growing influence of Democratic-Republican societies and a new Republican Party presented Federalists with the alarming prospect of political defeat and exclusion. This prompted many of them to take a second look at France and to disown the feelings they had previously expressed: perhaps the messy aftermath of the French Revolution proved that societies were indeed doomed to expire. The clear message of these reassessments was that optimism about the future of the United States should be balanced with a sober acknowledgment of decline. Some orators, like the physician Cushing Otis of Scituate, Massachusetts, combined paeans to America with a warning that France had collapsed because all

⁵¹ William Smith, *An Oration, Delivered in St. Philip’s Church, Before the Inhabitants of Charleston, South-Carolina, on the Fourth of July, 1796* (Charleston: W. P. Young, 1796), 13, 25–26.

⁵² George R. Burrill, *An Oration, Delivered in the Benevolent Congregational Meeting House, on the Fourth of July 1797* (Providence, R.I.: Carter and Wilkinson, 1797), 13. See also Samuel Rockwell, *An Oration, Delivered at the Celebration of American Independence, at Salisbury, Fourth July, Ninety-Seven* (Litchfield, Conn.: T. Collier, 1797), 9.

⁵³ Noah Webster, *An Oration Pronounced Before the Citizens of New-Haven, on the Anniversary of the Independence of the United States, July 4th 1798* (New Haven: T. and S. Green, 1798), 3, 10. See also John Wells, *An Oration, Delivered on the Fourth of July, 1798, at St. Paul’s Church, Before the Young Men of the City of New-York* (New York: McLean and Lang, 1798), 12; and Cushing Otis, *An Oration, Pronounced at Scituate, July 4, 1800* (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1800), 9.

societies “have their rise, their progress, and their decay.” Others drew only bleak lessons from the turmoil in Europe, placing France “among the ghosts of perished nations” and warning against political disunity in America that might bring the same dark fate upon the United States.⁵⁴

In the last years of the eighteenth century, Federalists rejected an earlier view of America’s providential identity that posited the American Revolution as a “glorious example” to other nations. After 1797 numerous orators inverted the lines of influence they had originally discerned in the 1780s – an influence that had brought American principles to France – and now feared openly that the “mad fury” of Europe would overtake politics in the United States.⁵⁵ These fears were borne out in the extraordinary election of 1800, as Thomas Jefferson sneaked into the White House and Federalist support collapsed in the South. John Adams won every electoral college vote in New England; Jefferson won 85 percent of the votes in the South. Although Republicans enjoyed some success in rural areas of Massachusetts and Connecticut, this strongly sectional outcome buttressed the siege mentality of Federalists in the North: French ideas had overtaken the states outside New England, and it was too late for Federalist orators to prevent this ideological contamination. The country had been torn asunder, and now the “mad fury” of France had usurped the government of the United States.⁵⁶

Alarmed by the growing power and appeal of the Republican Party, Federalists made extraordinary revisions to their previous optimism. Independence orations after 1797 offered frequent warnings against “foreign influence,” and some Federalists even ventured the suggestion that the United States had already begun its decline.⁵⁷ New York attorney Thomas Grosvenor told an audience in the Hudson Valley in 1801 that America had fallen foul of the “general curse of nations,” from which “our country had no reason to expect an exemption.”⁵⁸ Others formally disavowed the doctrine that America’s political achievement could be exported. John Rogers, a New Hampshire Federalist, warned in 1803 against the “charming effects of the new-fangled philosophy” that hoped “to

⁵⁴ Otis, *An Oration*; William J. Hobby, *An Oration, Delivered at St. Paul’s Church, Augusta, on the Fourth of July, 1798* (Augusta, Ga.: John Erdman Smith, 1800), 15, 22.

⁵⁵ John Callender, *An Oration, Pronounced July 4, 1797, At the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston* (Boston: Benjamin Edes, 1797), 12; see also Rockwell, 6.

⁵⁶ Sharp, 247–499; Elkins and McKittrick, 750–54.

⁵⁷ For early examples of Federalist xenophobia and the claim that foreign influence was inevitably corrosive, see Theodore Dwight, *An Oration Spoken at Hartford On the Anniversary of American Independence* (Hartford, Conn.: Hudson and Goodwin, 1798), 30; Samuel Austin, *An Oration, Pronounced at Worcester, on the Fourth of July, 1798* (Worcester: Leonard Worcester, 1798), 33; James Gould, *An Oration, Pronounced at Litchfield, On the Anniversary of the Independence of the United States of America* (Litchfield, Conn.: T. Collier, 1798), 24–26; John Lathrop Jr., *An Oration, Pronounced on the 4th Day of July, 1798* (Dedham, Mass.: Minerva Press, 1798), 10; and Josiah Quincy, *An Oration, Pronounced July 4, 1798* (Boston: John Russell, 1798), 18.

⁵⁸ Thomas Peabody Grosvenor, *An Oration, Delivered at the Town of Claverack, on the Fourth of July, 1801* (Hudson, N.Y.: Balance Press, 1801), 13.

revolutionize the world.” Noting that the American Revolution had given ample proof of a different, providential destiny for the United States, Rogers lamented that Americans seemed to be “following the footsteps of those great nations and republics, which heretofore have figured high in the catalogue of fame, but are, long since, sunk in oblivion, or become the vassals of despotism.”⁵⁹ In the early years of the French Revolution, Americans from all sides of the political spectrum had looked forward to the prospect that France would emulate and vindicate the United States. Only a decade later, this view was anathema to Federalists.

This Federalist revisionism on France rejected the idea of an “age of revolutions” that had briefly buttressed American historical providentialism after 1789. Revolution was now entangled with that “new-fangled philosophy” that had destroyed France’s prospects after 1789. For Federalist attorney John Lowell, giving the Faneuil Hall independence oration in 1799, it was now “the misfortune” of Americans “to live in an age of violent Revolution.”⁶⁰ His successor in 1800, Joseph Hall, boasted erroneously that Americans had “never entertained the mad project of revolutionizing the world.”⁶¹ Revolution had become a “hydra,” and Americans had now to reject its avatars (both abroad and at home) rather than to foster them. This Federalist volte-face was enabled partly by the zeal with which Robespierre and his colleagues attacked Christianity, culminating in the desecration of Notre Dame in October 1793. *The Age of Reason* (which appeared in two parts in 1794 and 1795) was also integral to this process, and Thomas Paine put an American face upon French heresy.

If universal freedom depended upon the debunking of revealed religion, committed Christians were obviously suspicious of any plan to revolutionize the world. This led Federalists to question whether the political lessons of both the American Revolution and its French successor had been properly established. France’s example suggested that an excess of liberty would lead to political collapse and atheism; the United States should strive to avoid the same mistake. Because the emerging Republican Party strongly supported immigration, an extension of the franchise, and the mobilization of popular protest, Federalists recast their views of France with an eye to the political debate at home. Jonathan Maxcy, a Baptist minister and the president of Rhode Island College, told a Providence audience in 1799 that “the indefinite phrase, ‘*Rights of Man*,’ seems to imply, that man is born into the world with certain connatural political rights. This cannot be true, for government is the creature of man’s invention and wisdom, and . . . has but one right, that of self-preservation.”⁶²

⁵⁹ John Rogers, *An Oration, Pronounced at Campton, New Hampshire, on the Fourth of July, 1803* (Concord, Mass.: George Hough, 1803), 10, 13.

⁶⁰ John Lowell Jr., *An Oration, Pronounced July 4, 1799* (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1799), 6, 16.

⁶¹ Joseph Hall, *An Oration, Pronounced July 4, 1800* (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1800), 12.

⁶² Jonathan Maxcy, *An Oration, Delivered in the First Congregational Meeting-House, at Providence, on the Fourth of July, 1799* (Providence, R.I.: John Carter, 1799), 8.

Thomas Paine's punishment for writing *The Age of Reason*, it seemed, was to be replaced in the Federalist civics syllabus by Thomas Hobbes.

The cumulative effect of these retreats and revisions was to make the Federalists seem far less optimistic than they had been in the early 1790s and to establish Federalism as a reactionary rather than a revolutionary force in the minds of many Americans. When they did offer speculation on the course of current events, Federalists tended to adopt bleak views of either history or providence. Perhaps Napoleon would seize the mines of Mexico and Peru before conquering North America, suggested one Connecticut fatalist in 1799.⁶³ Or perhaps, as several prominent Federalists claimed in 1798, the French Revolution was part of an international conspiracy to destroy religion altogether. Jedidiah Morse, a celebrated scholar and Congregational minister, created a sensation in 1798 with his warnings against the Illuminati, a secret society of Bavarian atheists who were purportedly responsible for the chaos in Europe. Fears of the Illuminati – and the possibility of their gaining a foothold in the United States – seeped into Federalist addresses, replacing an earlier confidence about American influence with a creeping dread of foreign contamination.⁶⁴ Although Federalists frequently looked to divine assistance to avert these calamitous prospects, the tenor of their language both reduced the scope of American possibility – from the extension of the American political experiment to its mere maintenance and survival – and left ample room for the gloomy prospect that a public enamored of the Republicans would merit divine vengeance.

Federalists presided over the dismantling of more optimistic visions of American progress in the decade after 1797, reviving the notion of national decline and even directing it against the United States. Federalist orators installed George Washington as their model of civic duty and political genius, even as they abridged his political opinions to the contents of the Farewell Address. Endorsing Washington's frequent attributions of political and military events to providence, the Federalists regrouped behind an inward-looking, defensive agenda that presented an anemic contrast with the grander visions and prospects of the early 1790s. Meanwhile, their failure to hold public support outside of

⁶³ William Brown, *An Oration, Spoken at Hartford, On the Anniversary of American Independence, July 4th, A.D. 1799* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1799), 8, 20. Brown suggested southern slaves would, in the event of a French invasion, "instantly join the standard of the invader, and greedily unite with him, in the work of plunder and blood."

⁶⁴ On the intellectual roots of this paranoia, see May, 261–63. Morse developed his theory of Illuminati influence in a 1798 fast-day sermon: *A Sermon, Delivered May 9th, 1798, Being the Day Recommended for Solemn Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer* (Boston: Samuel Hall, 1798). The conspiracy theory was widely broadcast via Fourth of July orations in 1798 and 1799: see John Cotton Smith, *An Oration, Pronounced at Sharon, On the Anniversary of American Independence, 4th of July, 1798* (Litchfield, Conn.: T. Collier, 1798); Elijah Parish, *An Oration, Delivered at Byfield, July 4, 1799* (Newburyport, Mass.: Angier March, 1799); and Thomas Grant, *A Sermon, Delivered at Flemington, on the 4th of July 1799* (Trenton: G. Craft, 1799).

New England (or even to consolidate their standing with all New Englanders) cast a long shadow across their projections of America's destiny.⁶⁵

Republican orators had similar troubles steering a course between the events of Europe and the prospects for America. New York minister Samuel Miller had argued that the ends of the French Revolution would eventually justify the means, but Napoleon's accession of power in 1799 made a happy outcome seem more distant than ever. Was God truly on Napoleon's side? Perhaps, as Baptist minister John Leland argued in 1802, it was too early to tell: "The *Revolution of France* yet hangs in awful suspense," he told an Independence Day crowd in Massachusetts, but Americans would be regarded as the architects of French success if the turbulent political developments eventually ended "on the side of *Liberty and Right*."⁶⁶ Leland attacked the Federalists for giving up hope in France and in the possibility of similar revolutions inspired by the American example; as another Republican argued in 1799, the Federalists deserved censure for condemning "every struggle of an oppressed nation for its rightful freedom, as an effort of lawless and wicked rebellion."⁶⁷

But France had met a basic standard of failure, in the eyes of the Federalists and even some Republican observers, and the irreligious turn of the French Revolution forced its American defenders to clarify their own beliefs. The Republican Party was vulnerable in this respect. Jefferson's supporters ranged from political radicals like Thomas Paine to evangelical Christians like John Leland.⁶⁸ Even though Jefferson's religious views inclined more toward the former than the latter, he was forced to maintain a public piety and to deny recurring Federalist accusations of deism and atheism.⁶⁹ Jefferson's political opponents played up his affinity with religious dissidents, while evangelical Republicans resorted to elaborate arguments to prove that their party enjoyed God's support. In his 1802 oration, John Leland even claimed that the recent religious revivals in

⁶⁵ John M. Murrin has argued that, while Federalists and Republicans were divided in their approach to expansionism, their difference of opinion was more on the method of extending the United States than the propriety of expansion. Murrin suggests that the Federalists espoused expansion as a government-led process that paid careful attention to Europe; the Republicans, on the other hand, viewed western expansion as the *raison d'être* of the United States. Murrin, "The Jeffersonian Triumph and American Exceptionalism," *Journal of the Early Republic* 20, no. 1 (2000): 1–25, at 8–12. For a stronger contrast between Republicans and Federalists on the question of an extended American empire, see Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 53–79.

⁶⁶ John Leland, *An Oration, Delivered at Cheshire, July 5 1802, on the Celebration of Independence* (Pittsfield, Mass.: Phineas Allen, 1802), 2.

⁶⁷ Ezekiel Bacon, *An Oration, Delivered at Williamstown, on the 4th of July, 1799* (Bennington: Anthony Haswell, 1799), 21.

⁶⁸ On Jefferson's dependence on Baptists, Methodists, and other nontraditional denominations for support, see May, 302–4. For a representative example of deist support for the Republican Party, see Elihu Palmer, *The Political Happiness of Nations, An Oration* (New York: n.p., 1800).

⁶⁹ Jefferson made vigorous efforts to distance himself from Thomas Paine, particularly after Paine's return to the United States in 1802. See Keane, 459.

Kentucky – a staunchly Republican state – demonstrated providential approval of Jefferson: “Can there be an instance given where there has been a like display of God’s power in any State in the Union,” Leland asked rhetorically, “which has left the people as generally *federalists*?” The Kentucky revivals demonstrated that “democrats can be religious,” and provided an American riposte to the Federalists’ incessant focus on France.⁷⁰

Leland’s argument pointed the way toward the most obvious Republican response to the Federalist challenge: a complete avoidance of France. For some Republicans, this involved the maintenance of long-standing ideas about America’s significance in a global providential scheme but a blurring of the details by which the United States would reform the world. Although Republican orators confirmed that America was different from every other nation on earth, they sustained their hope that (in the words of one New York orator) the world might eventually be combined in “one grand, universal, federal republic” along the lines of the American Constitution.⁷¹ While orators offered “golden prophesies of extended happiness and indefinite improvement,” they avoided the specific application of this optimism to Europe’s fractured politics.⁷² A New Jersey minister invited an Independence Day crowd in 1802 to retrace “the ways of Providence for a series of years past” and to “look forward into futurity” with “blissful amazement.” Amid these dazzling prospects, however, France was nowhere to be seen.⁷³

A more common Republican argument was to concentrate upon what one orator from Georgia called “the happy destiny of America”: the expansion of the United States across the entire continent.⁷⁴ The view that America should expand across space, rather than concentrate its efforts on developing manufacturing in the eastern states, was cherished by Republicans in the first years of the nineteenth century for a variety of reasons. In the wake of the French Revolution, the idea that God favored territorial aggrandizement served to focus attention westward toward an area that might be “improved” far more readily than Europe. Whereas many Federalists had serious doubts about the wisdom of such expansion, Republican orators praised Jefferson’s instincts in this regard.⁷⁵ In 1803, moreover, the Louisiana Purchase offered a neat segue for Republicans who were keen to look to the west rather than to the east.

⁷⁰ Leland, 10.

⁷¹ Chauncey Lee, *An Oration, Delivered at Lansingburgh, on the Fourth of July, AD 1797* (Lansingburgh, N.Y.: R. Moffitt and Co., 1797), 13, 16.

⁷² George I. Eacker, *An Oration, Delivered at the Request of the Officers of the Brigade of the City and County of New York, and of the County of Richmond* (New York: William Durell, 1801), 7, 18.

⁷³ Benjamin Bennett, *An Anniversary Address, Delivered At Middletown Point Church, on Monday the fifth of July, 1802, on the subject of AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE* (New York: G. Forman, 1802), 5, 13, 17.

⁷⁴ John E. Anderson, *An Oration, Delivered in St. Paul’s Church, Augusta, on the Fourth of July, 1801* (Augusta: William J. Bunce, 1801), 8.

⁷⁵ See, for instance, Timothy Hilliard, *An Oration, Pronounced before the Inhabitants of Portland, July 4th, 1803* (Portland, Maine: B. A. Jenks, 1803), 13, 16.

Napoleon had renounced his ambitions in the Western Hemisphere, partly because of the inability of French forces to reverse the Haitian Revolution. He offered Jefferson the chance to open the lands beyond the Mississippi (and to establish U.S. control over the vital port of New Orleans), and this in turn enabled Americans to imagine the glorious colonization of their own continent rather than the redemption of Europe. According to one Republican address in 1804, "kind providence" had intervened at precisely the moment when France seemed likely to threaten American interests, "dispelling the temporary gloom that hung over us like a sullen cloud." Americans could refigure their divine mission through westward expansion, offering a "scene of political grandeur and superiority" to any nation that cared to learn from its example.⁷⁶

This thinking reached its apogee in 1804, as the completion of the purchase animated many independence orations as well as a number of special addresses. David Ramsay, perhaps the most reliable exponent of historical providentialism in the early republic, offered a particularly grandiose assessment of the purchase and its likely influence in the future. Addressing a crowd in his hometown of Charleston – twenty-four years to the day that British troops had occupied the city during the Revolutionary War – Ramsay confidently proclaimed that God intended the United States to stretch "from the Atlantic to the Pacific ocean, and from the lakes of Canada to the Gulf of Mexico." The nation would welcome immigrants from around the globe and would number more than a billion inhabitants by 2004. The extraordinary physical geography of the continent had long suggested that God had special plans for Americans; the Louisiana Purchase, along with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, was a providential gift intended to realize the incredible potential of the United States. In keeping with the politically purposive nature of historical providentialism, the only uncertainty in Ramsay's address was whether Americans would recognize their great destiny and "improve the heaven-sent boon" that had been placed before them. This was a "bounden duty" given the providential design, but Americans could console themselves that, in discharging it, they would secure "an uncommon portion of happiness" among the nations of the earth.⁷⁷

In spite of these optimistic speculations about the American West, Ramsay could not entirely forget about Europe. He hoped that the United States would prove a refuge for oppressed peoples from around the world, and he clung to the idea that America might yet "regenerate the governments of the old [world],

⁷⁶ John Wentworth, *An Oration, Delivered at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on the Fourth July, 1804* (Portsmouth: Samuel Nutting, 1804), 3, 15, 16.

⁷⁷ David Ramsay, *An Oration, On the Cession of Louisiana, to the United States* (Charleston, S.C.: W. P. Young, 1804), 4, 17, 21, 25–27. Many Republican orators followed Ramsay's lead in subsequent independence orations. See, for example, Gabriel Nourse, ed., *The Glorious Spirit of '76, Being a Collection of Patriotic and Philanthropic Addresses on the Anniversary of American Independence* (Hagerstown, Md.: Jacob U. Dietrick, 1806), 25; Robert Polk, *Oration Delivered in George Town, Columbia, on the Fourth Day of July, 1807* (Washington, D.C.: David P. Polk, 1809), 15; and Eldred Simkins, *An Oration, In Commemoration of the Anniversary of American Independence, Delivered at Edgefield Court-House, on the Fourth of July 1807* (Augusta, Ga.: Chronicle Office, 1807), 20–22.

without the horrors and bloodshed of revolutions.” In Ramsay’s redemptive vision, the social pressures in Europe that encouraged both tyranny and violent resistance would be slowly and happily relieved by emigration to America. European leaders might consequently “relax in their oppressions” and avoid the calamitous consequences that had followed the revolution in France. In reality, events seemed to be moving in the opposite direction. America became still more mired in European politics, particularly during Jefferson’s second administration. France and Spain clashed with the United States over the Mississippi River and Florida, respectively; Britain and France continued to reject the neutrality of the United States and to drag American shipping (and, in the case of Britain, American sailors) into their ongoing war.⁷⁸ The Louisiana Purchase offered a brief respite and enabled Republicans to argue that their president might yet outwit the mighty powers of Europe. But Jefferson was dogged by foreign interference throughout his term of office, and his chosen tactic for confronting this – the Embargo Act of 1807 – harmed American businesses and ports without making an impact on Britain and France. Even if Republicans found some rhetorical refuge in the prospects of the West, Europe was never far from their thoughts.

The cumulative effect of these foreign intrusions was to create a skeptical undertow in Republican rhetoric, a sense that the grandest visions of America’s future deviated from the facts at hand. As Jefferson tried and failed to address encroachments on American shipping by suspending all foreign trade, Republican orators confronted more seriously the possibility of national decline. One Massachusetts orator who dedicated an entire independence oration to the topic in 1805 derived optimism only from his hope that Americans would focus on agriculture rather than commerce and might therefore stay the process of declension.⁷⁹ John Gardiner, a New Jersey Republican, was forced in 1807 to acknowledge that even the United States would one day collapse. Addressing a large Independence Day crowd, he sought nonetheless to dispel the gloom that had settled on the nation: “Shall a man, when, with much labor and toil, he has erected a house, begin immediately to pull it down, because it is destined to fall before the ravages of time?” Americans could not determine when God would eventually forsake them, and so they should retain faith in their prospects rather than succumb to despair.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ For a general summary of the encroachments on American shipping (and the causes of the War of 1812), see Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 5–28. For a more involved account of the economic ambitions and frustrations of Jefferson and Madison throughout this period, see Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 209–35.

⁷⁹ John Danforth Dunbar, *An Oration, Pronounced on the 4th July, 1805, at Pembroke, at the Request of a Convention of Republicans, from various parts of the County of Plymouth* (Boston: True and Parks, 1805), 9.

⁸⁰ John D. Gardiner, *An Oration Delivered in Roxbury, NJ, on the Fourth of July, 1807* (Morristown, N.J.: Jacob Mann, 1807), 23.

Gardiner admitted in his oration that disunity among Americans had damaged the nation's prospects, and even the most optimistic Republican orations from this period betray the venomous and exhausting political climate of the first party system. Jefferson had argued at his inauguration in 1801 that Federalists and Republicans should reconcile around his presidency; a few months later, at an independence celebration in New York, one Republican orator suggested that citizens could unite in "the consideration of futurity."⁸¹ But for the eight years that Jefferson directed the nation's affairs, the visions of futurity on each side were fractured and hard to reconcile. While Republicans developed a historical providentialism that looked westward rather than eastward, the Napoleonic Wars prevented Jefferson from realizing this shift of perspective. Federalists, meanwhile, offered a pessimistic assessment of providence that vastly reduced the scope of American influence or suggested that the United States had already succumbed to "the general curse of nations." The providential consensus that had survived the debates over the Constitution and the first years of the French Revolution had been replaced with two divergent visions of God's plan for America. As the Federalists became still more estranged from Washington politics, and the Republicans took the nation into another European war, the possibility of reconciliation seemed especially remote.

3. "The Illustrious Hereafter": 1808–1815

By the summer of 1808, it was clear to many Americans that the Embargo Act would not force Europe to respect American neutrality, and the sheer ease with which European powers managed to ride out the suspension of American trade was as deflating for Republicans as it was galling to the Federalists. (Republican stalwarts were also exasperated by the efforts of sailors and merchants to find ways around the restrictions.) Jefferson's successor, James Madison, abandoned the embargo in 1809, but he struggled to find alternative methods of delivering the United States from European bullying. Consequently, Madison took the republic into another war with Britain in 1812, in the hopes of formalizing American independence both within and beyond the nation's borders. Like the embargo, the war was incredibly unpopular in many parts of the country, and especially in Federalist-dominated New England. Beyond their disgust at another round of hardship in the port cities, Federalists believed that Jefferson's and Madison's fixation with neutrality had turned the United States into an ally of Napoleon. (For those New England Federalists who had already nourished this dark suspicion, Madison's decision to ask Congress for war with Britain in June 1812 was the coup de grace.) While Republicans tried to present both the embargo and the war as a test of the nation's virtue, Federalists believed that the nation had taken another step toward the abyss.⁸²

⁸¹ Eacker, 17.

⁸² McCoy, 218–21. For the Republican view that the embargo was a test of public virtue, see Zabdiel Sampson, *Republican Celebration of American Independence: An Oration, Pronounced in the New Meeting House at Plymouth, July 4, 1808* (Boston: Adams and Rhoades, 1808), 12.

From 1800 onward, many Federalists exhibited a kind of disbelief that the American people continued to vote for Republicans, in spite of the mismanagement of national affairs under Jefferson and Madison. After nearly a decade of opposition, this disbelief curdled into frustration and even anger with the American voters themselves. Madison had been elected in 1808 by a “popular infatuation,” according to one Independence Day orator from New York.⁸³ Federalists pleaded with God to “open the eyes of the people that they may see their true interest.”⁸⁴ Others simply gave up, dismissing the populace as “besotted and most wretchedly deluded” and suggesting that the corruption of the people at large had always led to the downfall of nations.⁸⁵ This pessimism unleashed another wave of sermons and orations on the inevitability of decline, accompanied by the prediction that America would join the ranks of fallen nations in the near future.⁸⁶ As one New York Federalist warned in 1814, surveying the prospects of the United States as the British prepared to invade Washington, “we have more to fear than we have to expect.”⁸⁷

Federalists channeled this resignation about America’s future into two extreme responses to Republican rule: one political, and one providential. New England Federalists argued that the sustained popularity of the Republican Party confirmed the corruption and tyranny of majority rule; New England might best defend its interests (and escape the corruption of French philosophy) by breaking away from the Union. Amazingly, these sentiments were offered even on Independence Day, with some Federalist orators arguing that New England’s secession would be true to the principles of the American Revolution.⁸⁸ Noah Webster, who had retired from Federalist politics after an argument with Alexander Hamilton in 1801, returned in 1814 to deliver an independence oration to the Washington Benevolent Society in Northampton,

⁸³ John Anthon, *An Oration, Delivered before the Washington Benevolent Society and the Hamilton Society in the City of New York, on the Fourth of July, 1812* (New York: Largin and Thompson, 1812), 16.

⁸⁴ Samuel Emerson, *An Oration, Pronounced at Washington Hall, in Kennebunk, Maine, on the Fourth of July, 1811* (Kennebunk, Maine: J. K. Remich, 1811), 9.

⁸⁵ David Osgood, *A Solemn Protest Against the Late Declaration of War, in a Discourse, Delivered on the Next Lord’s Day After the Tidings of it were Received* (Cambridge, Mass.: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1812), 20; and William Samuel Buell, *An Oration, Delivered at Montgomery, Orange County, NY, On The Fourth of July, 1814* (New York: Van Winkle and Wiley, 1814), 18.

⁸⁶ See, for instance, Jotham Fairfield, *An Oration, Pronounced at the Meeting-House, in the Vicinity of Dartmouth College, on the Fourth of July, 1811* (Hanover, N.H.: Charles Spear, 1811), 11; and Samuel Fessenden, *An Oration, Delivered before the Federal Republicans of New Gloucester and the Adjacent Towns, July 4, 1811* (Portland, Maine: Gazette Press, 1811), 10, 12.

⁸⁷ Buell, 20.

⁸⁸ For secessionist sentiments in Federalist independence orations, see Festus Foster, *Oration, Pronounced before the Washington Benevolent Society, of the County of Franklin in the Town of Northfield, July 5, 1813* (Brattleboro, Vt.: William Fessenden, 1813), 18; Benjamin Nichols, *An Oration, Delivered on the Fifth of July, 1813, in the North Church, in Salem* (Salem: Joshua Cushing, 1813), 23; and Thomas Snell, *An Oration, Pronounced at Brookfield, July 5, 1813* (Brookfield, Mass.: E. Merriam, 1813), 25. Secessionist thinking was still more evident in Federalist addresses on other occasions, such as the anniversary of Washington’s birthday.

Massachusetts. In Webster's view, the long Republican dominance of American politics confirmed that the Constitution itself was flawed: it had been "framed for the government of men, not as they *are*, but as they *should be* – for a nation of virtuous, enlightened, disinterested men – a nation of imaginary beings." Webster urged his audience to abandon "the ridiculous vanity of considering ourselves as the most virtuous and enlightened people on earth" and to fashion a form of government that would properly reflect human weakness and political reality. If Republicans were determined to retain power and to push for westward expansion, the "Atlantic states" might easily be separated from the West, to everyone's advantage.⁸⁹

The other Federalist response was still more extreme. Perhaps, given the collapse of American virtues under the Republicans and the ongoing chaos of Europe, God was hastening the end times that would sweep away every existing government, including that of James Madison. America would have no role to play as the events of Bible prophecy were realized, except to suffer the same collapse as other governments and to submit to the rule of the Antichrist during the bleak years of the Tribulation. Yale president Timothy Dwight, in a fast-day sermon delivered soon after Madison's declaration of war in 1812, mapped recent European history onto Revelation and concluded that the pouring of God's sixth or seventh vial was imminent. Europe presented a terrible example of America's likely fate, absent a complete renunciation of Republican policies.⁹⁰ The apocalyptic providentialism of Dwight and others was more inclined toward political abdication than engagement.⁹¹ A South Carolina minister told his congregation in 1811 that, regardless of which party controlled the presidency, Americans would "look in vain" for any peaceful accommodation with Europe for the next thirty-six years, that "times will get worse," and that "persecution is coming apace." Federalists could reassure themselves that Republicans (in spite of all appearances to the contrary) were equally impotent in God's grander scheme. Perhaps the Tribulation would at least terminate Madison's presidency; but it would be prudent for Federalists to retreat from the imminent apocalypse and prepare themselves for the next life instead.⁹²

⁸⁹ Noah Webster, *An Oration, Pronounced before the Knox and Warren Branches of the Washington Benevolent Society, at Amherst, on July 4, 1814* (Northampton: William Butler, 1814), 5–6, 15–16.

⁹⁰ Timothy Dwight, *A Discourse, in Two Parts, Delivered July 23, 1812, on the Public Fast, in the Chapel of Yale College* (New York: J. Seymour, 1812; repr., New Haven: Howe and Deforest, 1812), 8, 34.

⁹¹ See also Lewis Bigelow, *An Oration, Pronounced at Templeton, July 5, 1813, in Commemoration of the Thirty Seventh Anniversary of American Independence* (Worcester: Isaac Sturtevant, 1813), 27–28.

⁹² William C. Davis, *The Millennium; or, A Short Sketch on the Rise and Fall of Antichrist* (Cambridge, S.C.: Thomas M. Davenport, 1813), 65, 72, 76. Davis hedged his apocalyptic predictions with the warning that Americans should "prepare for death" lest they did not survive the "blood and slaughter" of the coming decades: "Every man who expects to live twenty or thirty years longer, and love the Redeemer's cause and kingdom, and wishes well to his own soul, ought to prepare to end his days."

Federalists struggled to articulate a consistent view of politics, providence, or history in this bleak moment. On Independence Day in 1814, rival Federalist orators in Cambridge and Boston offered divergent interpretations of America's current predicament. For Benjamin Whitwell in Faneuil Hall, the fatal mistake of Americans had been to support the French revolutionaries in 1789. This had betrayed Louis XVI (whom Whitwell depicted as a kind and progressive ruler rather than a "destructive demon" like Napoleon) and had squandered the potential of the American Revolution: "But for this fatal policy, we might this day have celebrated the festival of humanity – the universal jubilee of nations."⁹³ Across the Charles River, Richard Henry Dana suggested that Americans had always been foolish to believe that their revolution would have regenerative powers, that "the day which we have met to celebrate . . . was to work an universal change in the condition and character of man." While Whitwell lamented a historical providentialism that had been forfeited after 1789, Dana offered a pessimistic anatomy of human nature: "The physical and moral world have undergone no change – notwithstanding the American Revolution. Arabia still has its deserts, and mankind their sins."⁹⁴ Both men saw some hope in the temporary abdication of Napoleon in 1814, but it was clear to Dana, Whitwell, and Federalists more generally that the United States had lost its way under Republican direction. As British troops burned Washington in August 1814, and New England's leading politicians met secretly in Hartford that December to discuss a formal separation from the Union, Federalists had all but abandoned the idea of a special destiny for America.

The Republican understanding of recent history took a very different view, though the supporters of Jefferson and Madison struggled to explain the twists and turns of European events. Republicans routinely inverted the Federalist story about the early republic by emphasizing the intrigues of the Adams administration and suggesting that the United States had come close to disaster under the twin pressures of Adams's autocratic rule and Hamilton's military ambition. One orator noted in 1808 that Jefferson had come to power at precisely the moment that "the ensigns of tyranny hovered around" and "the political hemisphere darkened." The election of 1800 was an instance of divine intervention, at which God had "appear[ed] and avert[ed] impending ruin."⁹⁵ The inclination of Republicans was to stress America's many blessings and to avoid a close engagement with the wars in Europe, narrating America's past and its future prospects "with unbroken current and increasing magnificence," as a New Jersey Republican enjoined in 1809.⁹⁶

⁹³ Benjamin Whitwell, *An Oration, Pronounced July 4, 1814* (Boston: Charles Callender, 1814), 16.

⁹⁴ Richard Henry Dana, *An Oration, Delivered Before the Washington Benevolent Society at Cambridge, July 4, 1814* (Cambridge, Mass.: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1814), 3.

⁹⁵ Sampson, 9.

⁹⁶ Samuel Whelpley, *An Oration, Delivered, in Consequence of his Illness, by his Son, Melancton P. Whelpley, in the Presbyterian Church in Morris-Town, July 4, 1809* (Morristown, N.J.: Henry

But the failures of the embargo policy threatened this view, as Americans were asked to endure economic hardship without any obvious concessions from France or Britain. In 1808 a Boston Republican argued that the embargo provided numerous benefits to Americans without the “seas of blood” and “mangled bodies” of the Napoleonic Wars; yet his claim that Americans could resist France and Britain “while sitting under our vines and fig trees” was belied by the economic hardship along the seaboard during the embargo. (In any case, President Madison abandoned the vines and the fig trees as he readied the nation for war in 1811 and 1812.)⁹⁷ At this point, Republicans returned to the idea of national expansion rather than the redemption of Europe. Charleston orator William Crafts, in an 1812 independence oration, suggested that war with Britain was a prerequisite for the realization of God’s “magnificent plan”: a mighty empire would grow up in the United States and “fill the bosom of prophecy,” as soon as Americans confirmed their independence from Britain. Crafts and other orators – especially the “war hawks” who lobbied for the invasion of Canada – presented an aggrandized America as the next stage in God’s plan for the nation and conditioned this prize merely on the public’s resolve in reprising the Revolutionary War.⁹⁸

This Republican refuge in expansionism was a precursor to the “manifest destiny” thinking of the 1830s and 1840s; in fact, one of the most enthusiastic proponents of manifest destiny in this later period, attorney and congressman Charles Jared Ingersoll, used these expansionist arguments in defense of James Madison’s presidency.⁹⁹ In 1812 Ingersoll delivered an address in Philadelphia that was similar to William Crafts’s oration in Charleston. Unlike Crafts, however, Ingersoll barely mentioned the war with Britain. The avoidance of “the actual crisis of our affairs” was not, he argued, a desperate or evasive piece of demagoguery, but a necessary response to America’s future providential significance: “Whenever I reflect on the destinies of this country, my mind is irresistibly carried forward from the past and the present, glorious and pleasant as they are, to the refulgent anticipations which illuminate the future.” Skipping ahead to “the middle of this century,” Ingersoll looked out on a massively aggrandized United States, stretching from Canada to Florida and from the Atlantic to the distant West, comprising more than 30 million people “speaking one and

P. Russell, 1809), 14. Whelpley, according to the printed oration, was taken sick on the Fourth of July, and so his address was read by his son.

⁹⁷ Sampson, 12. See also Benjamin Franklin Thompson, *An Oration, Delivered before the Tammany Society, or Columbian Order, of Brookhaven, L.I., And a Numerous Assemblage of Citizens, on the 36th Anniversary of American Independence, July 4, 1811* (Brooklyn: Alden Spooner, 1811).

⁹⁸ William Crafts, *An Oration, Delivered in St. Michael’s Church, Before the Inhabitants of Charleston, South Carolina, on the Fourth of July, 1812* (Charleston: W. P. Young, 1812), 5, 25.

⁹⁹ For a brief account of Ingersoll’s early career and ideas, see Steven Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790–1820* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 93–100.

the same language, alive to the same national sympathies." Although Ingersoll expressed his hope that the successful American nation might offer "instruction" to the "superannuated east," he was clear that the "local immunities" of America would make it impossible for Europe to "protract or prevent the national greatness to which [the United States] are destined." Ingersoll offered this "illustrious hereafter" of American expansion as an inevitable stage in the providential plan, dismissing the bitter debate over the War of 1812 by imagining a future in which Europe was irrelevant.¹⁰⁰

Given the stubbornness of Federalist opposition to the Republican ascendancy, we can see in Ingersoll's oration the temptation to dismiss New England entirely. In pronouncing the obsolescence of the "superannuated East," Ingersoll might have been referring to Massachusetts or Connecticut as well as Europe. By 1815, though, both Federalists and Republicans had reconciled around a revised version of historical providentialism. In part, this providential truce was produced by the failure of either Federalists or Republicans to predict the war's outcome. After Andrew Jackson's victory over the British at the Battle of New Orleans in January 1815, Federalists were embarrassed by their flirtation with both apocalyptic despair and political secession. Republicans, meanwhile, were thwarted in their hopes that the war could be waged painlessly and that it would bring vast new territories into the Union: British troops had, after all, burned the White House and nearly every other federal building to the ground during their invasion of Washington, and Canada remained stubbornly resistant to its neighbor's advances even after the war's end.

The wider European conflict offered comfort and caution to both sides. Federalists and Republicans came together in 1813 to praise Russia's defeat of Napoleon, and most Federalists seemed finally to accept that Republicans had broken their emotional bond with France. Since 1800, Federalist addresses had frequently accepted the tenets of historical providentialism – that God had favored American history since its inception and that he had intended a grand role for the United States in the future – but Federalists had presented the Republican political ascendancy as a terrible break in the providential pattern, an interruption of such force and duration that America's bright destiny had been squandered. The defeat of Napoleon, however, and the success of the United States in thwarting the British assault, provided Federalists with an opportunity to patch the providential narrative: perhaps God still favored America, and the War of 1812 would vanquish Napoleon and alert Americans to their missteps along the path that God had marked out.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Charles Jared Ingersoll, *An Oration, Delivered at Mr. Harvey's Spring Garden, Before a Very Numerous Meeting of Democratic Citizens, July 4, 1812* (Philadelphia: John Binns, 1812), 3–7.

¹⁰¹ See, for instance, Abiel Holmes, *An Address, Delivered Before the Washington Benevolent Society, at Cambridge, 5 July, 1813* (Cambridge, Mass.: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1813); and Samuel C. Allen, *An Oration, Delivered at Greenfield, July 6, 1812* (Greenfield, Mass.: Denio and Phelps, 1812).

The independence orations of 1815, delivered months after news of a peace treaty with Britain had reached the United States, suggest that both Federalists and Republicans were ready to abandon their attempts to read every detail of European politics for providential significance. Federalists tempered their attacks on Republican Francophilia with the hope that America would now remain aloof from the conflicts in Europe.¹⁰² Republicans steered the United States away from the ongoing tensions in Europe, claiming that Americans had done their duty and might now be “exempted” from war.¹⁰³ While Federalists stressed the lessons of Washington’s Farewell Address, Republicans accepted that Europe was an intractable problem that seemed resistant to America’s example. Federalist orator Phineas White warned an audience in Vermont of “the vortex of the contentions and revolutions of the eastern world”; in New York, his Republican counterpart Samuel Berrian contrasted the sorry state of Europe – “a night of political ignorance, in which philosophy affords no light, nor history instruction” – with the “brilliant and unparalleled improvements” in the United States.¹⁰⁴ While the bitter debates of the preceding two decades were hardly forgotten, both sides found common ground as they located the next phase of providential development in the United States rather than in Europe.

For all their differences, Republicans and Federalists had repeatedly affirmed the control of providence over the course of American history, and not even the hardships of the embargo and the war could destroy Federalists’ hopes that God might yet deliver their country. In addition, both sides largely upheld the notion that the United States had been, at least temporarily, protected by God from the catastrophe of national collapse. Republicans’ prolonged efforts to make some progressive pattern out of European events gave way during this period to a more abstract sense of global mission. Although many Republican orators (and some Federalists) still maintained their hope that the American political example might yet regenerate the Old World, they backed away from their earlier claims that this had already happened: that the American and French revolutions signified a moral progression that might be indefinitely plotted against time and across the complicated political geography of Europe. Britain, France,

¹⁰² Lemuel Shaw, *An Oration, Delivered at Boston, July 4, 1815* (Boston: John Eliot, 1815); Nathaniel Chauncey, *An Oration, Delivered before the Washington Association of Philadelphia, and the Washington Benevolent Society of Philadelphia, on the Fourth of July, 1815* (Philadelphia: Office of the United States Gazette, 1815); and Andrew Bigelow, *An Oration, Delivered before the Washington Benevolent Society, at Cambridge, July 4, 1815* (Cambridge, Mass.: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1815).

¹⁰³ James T. Austin, *An Oration, Pronounced at Lexington, Mass., in Commemoration of the Independence of the United States of America, and the Restoration of Peace, 4th July 1815* (Boston: Rowe and Hooper, 1815), 19.

¹⁰⁴ Phineas White, *An Oration, Delivered at Dummerston, VT., July 4, 1815* (Brattleboro, Vt.: n.p., 1815), 16; and Samuel Berrian, *An Oration, Delivered before the Tammany Society, Or Columbian Order, Hibernian Provident, Columbian, and Shipwright’s Societies, in the City of New-York, on the Fourth Day of July, 1815* (New York: John Low, 1815), 27–28.

and Spain continued to play an important role in American politics, but it was the refocusing of American attention from, in Charles Ingersoll's terms, the "superannuated east" to the "adolescent west" that inspired fresh providential interpretations in the years ahead.

Conclusion: "Citizens of the World"

In July 1789, two weeks after the storming of the Bastille, Richard Price had written to the American diplomat William Stephens Smith to share his happiness that the spirit of 1776 had finally crossed the Atlantic. Noting the "vast deal of nonsense" about America's prospects that had circulated in Britain since 1783, Price hailed the French Revolution as "an event unspeakably pleasing to the united American states." While British skeptics had scorned the idea that the United States could sustain its independence, let alone nudge European nations toward political upheaval, Price's faith in the providential plan had been vindicated: "How short is human foresight? How wonderful are the workings of Providence?" In a sermon delivered thirty years earlier, Price had hoped that Britain – at the zenith of its imperial glory – might become God's instrument for bringing liberty and happiness to the nations of the world. By July 1789, it seemed that America had assumed this role in Britain's stead.¹⁰⁵

Price's immediate response to the French Revolution was a fresh tract, the *Discourse on the Love of our Country*, which honored the achievements of 1688, 1776, and 1789: the peaceful accession of William III, in Price's narration, was merely the prelude to "two other Revolutions, both glorious." Moreover, these three upheavals had launched an unstoppable movement for political reform, directed by God and implemented by revolutionaries around the world: "Behold, the light you have struck out, after setting *America* free, reflected to *France*, and there kindled into a blaze that lays despotism in ashes, and warms and illumines *Europe*!" While Price endorsed the idea of loving one's country, he presented national pride as merely a single component in a broader ardor for humanity. In place of the "blind and narrow principle" that produced "in every country a contempt of other countries," Price now recommended that "we ought to consider ourselves as citizens of the world, and take care to maintain a just regard to the rights of other countries." The years 1688, 1776, and 1789 were joined in Price's mind in a new formulation of historical providentialism. America had eclipsed Great Britain, but God was hardly an American nationalist. The successful transfer of liberty to France would be followed not only by American aggrandizement but by global revolution.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Thomas and Peach, eds., 3: 238–39. Price's original sermon was entitled *Britain's Happiness, and the Proper Improvement of it* (London: A. Millar and R. Griffiths, 1759). See Chapter 2, note 47 and accompanying text.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country, Delivered on Nov. 4, 1789... To the Society for Commemorating the Revolution in Great Britain* (London: G. Stafford for T. Cadell, 1789), 40, 8, 13.

As Price's *Discourse* circulated widely in Britain, it attracted one particularly notable critic. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke was disturbed not only by the worsening relationship between Louis XVI and the new legislature in France but also by historical providentialism. With specific reference to Price's juxtaposition of the revolutions in Britain, America, and France, Burke complained of a "spirit of change" in Europe and of the encouragement offered to revolutionary behavior by "the signals which have so often been given from pulpits." According to Burke, the "institutions of policy" and the "gifts of Providence, are handed down, to us and from us, in the same course and order." While historical providentialism envisaged a progressive plan for human history, Burke argued for the vitality of "antient institutions" and warned against the dangers of innovation. The human race, according to this theory, "moves on through the varied tenour of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression." Rather than providing any basis to imagine a grand future for a particular nation or even for the world at large, history "consists, for the great part, of the miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetites, which shake the public." Burke dismissed romantic notions that God would overthrow "the oppressors of the world," as Price liked to call them. If the past offered any help to the present, it was in the cautionary lessons of human weakness rather than the predictive pattern of a providential scheme.¹⁰⁷

Burke's *Reflections* sparked one of the most celebrated pamphlet wars of the eighteenth century, prompting Thomas Paine to write the two parts of *The Rights of Man*. But Richard Price's effort to revive an Atlantic historical providentialism found no purchase in the Britain of the 1790s. The early stumbles of the United States government did little to suggest that America was in the vanguard of international revolution, and British propagandists viewed France's political struggles from a staunchly nationalist perspective. The long war after 1792 was depicted as the latest iteration of a venerable enmity, and Price's argument that one might best cultivate "the Love of our Country" through the promotion of global citizenship was openly pilloried. Shortly after his death in 1791, Price's political enemies reprinted his 1759 sermon *Britain's Happiness* but purged the text of all references to a British historical providentialism. An anonymous introduction suggested that Price's remarks of three decades earlier were "equally applicable to the present situation of this country" but neglected to mention that the most grandiose and visionary sections of the sermon – tracing the evolution of a "joyful period" for mankind through the Reformation, the invention of printing, and the rise of a British imperial altruism – had been silently excised. Price's sermon was gutted by anti-French propagandists, resulting in a stilted and blandly chauvinistic appeal. Meanwhile, the editor of this tendentious abridgment invited any remaining admirers of the French

¹⁰⁷ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France, and on the Proceedings of Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event* (London: John Dodsley, 1790), 35, 48, 209.

Revolution and the rights of man to “embark immediately for France, to enjoy there upon the spot, . . . the blessings of anarchy and confusion.”¹⁰⁸

This isolated British example suggests that the survival of historical providentialism in the early United States was hardly an inevitable development. Much as Price’s vision had been crushed by the tumultuous events in France, the Federalists began to argue in 1795 in the terms established by Edmund Burke. Revolutions could easily escape the control of their initiators and do more harm than good; the political renovation of Europe was extremely unlikely; decline was an inevitable force in human history. But the Federalists had reason to defend the American Revolution and its consequences, and so they were less inclined than Burke to argue against the cause of revolutions in general. Their most pessimistic visions of national decline tended to contain at least a hope that God, given his favor toward America since the Puritan period, would yet restore the United States to prosperity and prominence. While Burke and others based their conservatism upon a cyclical understanding of human history and government, New England Federalists nurtured their own sense of American progress and retained hope that the upward trajectory of events in America might yet be reestablished.

The Republicans, for their part, joined Federalists in a providential compromise that preserved the achievements of Republican presidents and qualified the claim that God intended American history to result in the renovation of Europe. James Austin, a lawyer and state legislator who was invited to deliver the independence oration at Lexington in 1815, shared the joy of many Republicans in the wondrous reversal of American fortunes over the previous year:

Great GOD! We thank thee! Thou hast changed the scene. To thee we owe our deliverance. GOD of the Fathers, thou hast been the GOD of the Children.

Where is that Faction? Broken down – disgraced. Where that Enemy? Scattered – beaten – degraded – overthrown.

Your nation rises with renovated fame. Its destiny is great. Imperishable be its glory.¹⁰⁹

Austin may have exaggerated somewhat in his suggestion that “faction” had been purged from American life, but his claim that America’s reputation had been “renovated” was echoed in the Federalist orations from that year. Moreover, the injunction that Federalists and Republicans regroup around the noble prospects of the United States cohered with a Federalist desire to avoid further conflict over competing American visions of Europe. Nathaniel Chauncey, in a Federalist address delivered the same day in Philadelphia, noted that providence “has ever preserved this favoured land” and that, “when we look at the situation of our own country, we see much cause for gratitude in the return

¹⁰⁸ Richard Price, *Britain’s Happiness, and its full Possession of Civil and Religious Liberty, Briefly Stated and Proved* (London: J. F. and C. Rivington, 1791), 4, 7.

¹⁰⁹ James T. Austin, *An Oration, Pronounced at Lexington*, 21.

of peace.” As Napoleon fell from power in 1814, only to return from exile a few months later, Chauncey proposed a simple remedy that might unite both Federalists and Republicans in the future: “Let us rejoice that we are removed by distance, and secured by peace, from the distressing conflict.”¹¹⁰

The failure of the French Revolution to produce a stable republic seriously compromised American hopes that the world was moving toward regeneration. Those Republican thinkers who envisaged this regeneration in purely political terms – such as Thomas Paine and probably Jefferson himself – were unable to detach the rights of man from a heated and extremely bitter debate about religion. Paine and others had allied with religious figures in the Revolutionary War behind a loose definition of “providence.” For Paine, providence was simply shorthand for a benign and progressive historical process; for committed Christians, providence implied the actual involvement of God himself in human history. The apparently irreligious engine of the French Revolution encouraged American commentators in their witch-hunt against those Republicans who were suspected of deism or atheism. Although these inquisitors were chiefly Federalists, some Republicans (such as Samuel Miller of New York) were also placed in an impossible position when they encountered unorthodox religious beliefs in France and America.¹¹¹ The dependence of the Republicans upon evangelical voters forced Jefferson into increasingly hollow displays of piety, and the basis for a secular understanding of world history – or a predominantly rights-based conception of America’s political achievement and responsibility – was seriously eroded during this period.¹¹²

The fact that Europe had not taken its place in an American scheme of providential improvement presented a paradox whereby the United States was both less and more important: less, because its ambition to regenerate the governments of the world appeared to have failed its first major test; more, because this failure implied that providence intended America alone for political and social happiness. An anxiety about the meaning of American development, and about the kind of providential assignment that United States had been given, was only deepened by the frustrations and conflicts of this period. It would be misleading to suggest that Europe disappeared entirely from American providentialism. Instead, Republicans were relieved of their compulsion to track European events with close reference to the providential scheme, and Federalists overcame their long obsession with viewing Europe through the prism of

¹¹⁰ Chauncey, 16, 18.

¹¹¹ Miller left his prominent pulpit in New York (and his role as a leading clerical Jeffersonian) in 1813, retiring to Princeton’s new Theological Seminary and a much more withdrawn existence. Upon learning of Jefferson’s religious views after the latter’s death in 1826, Miller prepared and deposited at the seminary an affidavit regarding his involvement in Jeffersonian politics. Miller renounced Jefferson’s religious opinions and confessed that he was “wrong in suffering myself to be so warmly and actively engaged in *Politics*, as I was during that period.” Miller, “Letter and Enclosure Concerning Thomas Jefferson,” Princeton Theological Seminary, Luce Library MS (File D), 1830.

¹¹² On the “secular millennialism” of Paine and Jefferson, see May, 153–76.

the French Revolution. What remained on both sides was an interest in seeing America as distinctive but also a vague faith in America's role beyond the borders of the United States. In the two decades after 1815, Africa was to prove a more enticing prospect than Europe for the projection of this providential influence.

Finally, national providentialism in the United States had survived a turbulent period in which multiple versions of American history and providential design had been projected at the American public. The Republicans had bound themselves to the French Revolution and suggested that its success was guaranteed by a benign providence. The Federalists, meanwhile, had attacked the Republicans' sympathy for France and their war with Britain, suggesting that God opposed both and would terminate his ambitious plans for America. By 1815 neither prediction had come true, and yet the compulsion to structure American experience and prospects around the idea of a divine design persisted. This attests to the durability of providential thinking, and the ingenuity with which its proponents could finesse the events and outcomes that had eluded its grasp.

From the 1760s until 1815, Americans employed national providentialism to define an independent United States and the limits of their revolution. After the War of 1812, westward expansion seemed to offer a more stable terrain for providential projection than the broken politics of Europe. But expansion forced white Americans into a new engagement with nonwhite populations and a question that was as discomfiting as it was familiar: what role did God intend for indigenous people and Africans in his plan for America? Philadelphia Federalist Nathaniel Chauncey spoke in 1815 of America's "irresistible" destiny: "The afflicted African shall be acknowledged as a brother, and the Indian shall peacefully cultivate the soil over which his fathers roamed."¹¹³ In the event, the application of providential thinking to the questions of race and citizenship was no less problematic than the search for God's purposes in the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. The removal of foreign competition on the American continent gave white Americans greater freedom to determine the destiny of nonwhites, but the argument that God supported slavery, Indian removal, or the colonization of African Americans met with an eloquent and tenacious resistance in the decades after 1815 – not least from nonwhites themselves. In the process, the idiom of historical providentialism suffered its most serious challenge to date.

¹¹³ Chauncey, 22.

“Deifying Prejudice”

Race and Removal in the Early Republic

In 1783 Yale president Ezra Stiles addressed the troubling question of racial diversity in the new United States. Urging white Americans to have faith in “God’s good providence,” he suggested that blacks and Indians would “gradually vanish” as the white population increased.¹ By 1815 this prediction had been thoroughly confounded. Though increasingly assailed by the imperatives of expansion, Indians and blacks refused to “vanish” as Stiles had envisaged. White Americans had thus to reckon with a series of difficult questions about national development and providential intention. Did God require the United States to offer citizenship to nonwhites as well as whites? Were white Americans expected to educate and enfranchise blacks and Indians? Could a single, multiracial republic take hold across the entire continent, or did God intend to divide the vast territory of North America along racial lines?

After the War of 1812, the core assumptions of historical providentialism – that the United States had been specially favored by God and that its illustrious past presaged a glorious future – were seriously tested by the persistence of Indians and blacks on the American continent. Those white Americans who defended slavery, or who sought the removal of blacks and Indians, offered a variety of providential schemes in which God had purposely excluded nonwhites from citizenship. To secure the nation’s grand destiny, and to ensure that indigenous peoples and Africans would ultimately benefit, they argued that white Americans should promote racial separation and eschew shortsighted altruism. Meanwhile, the opponents of slavery and racial removal developed a new understanding of God’s plans for America that challenged the confident assertions of historical providentialism. Reverting to judicial arguments about God’s dealings with nations, these critical voices raised the unsettling prospect that God would humble or destroy the United States if the nation continued to mistreat its nonwhite populations.

¹ See Chapter 3, note 140 and accompanying text.

This specific form of judicial providentialism – which we might term a “providentialism of wrath” – first emerged during the debates over Indian removal, but became central to the campaign against African colonization and slavery itself after 1830. There was a good deal of similarity in the proposals to remove free blacks to Africa and Indians to the American West: both were presented as voluntary schemes for “colonization,” and both efforts enjoyed the support of leading clergymen who were willing to supply a providential rationale. The proponents of African colonization retained their providential enthusiasm into the 1830s (and beyond); the advocates of Indian removal eventually opted for a softer determinism that explained Indian “decline” as a natural rather than a providential process. In both of these instances, the prevailing vision of historical providentialism, which held that America would be favored and aggrandized toward some greater end, clashed directly with a judicial providentialism that promised the nation’s imminent destruction. Blacks and Indians were the subjects of this debate, but they were also vocal participants in establishing whether the great destiny of the United States – “the age of wonders” promised by Ezra Stiles in 1783 – would founder on the racial injustice that had always overshadowed America’s progress.

I. “The Hand of Heaven Is in It”: The Blueprint for Indian Removal

On May 10, 1820, Jedidiah Morse left his home in New Haven on a 1,500-mile journey to survey Native Americans in the Northwest. Morse’s long career had ensured him considerable fame (and notoriety) throughout the United States. As the discoverer of the Illuminati “conspiracy” in 1797, he had played a major role in the Federalist attack on the French Revolution. As a scholar, he had written a standard text on the American environment – *The American Geographer* – and had prepared a history of New England. As a clergyman, he had been closely involved both in quarrels over his own divided attention (his congregants grumbling that he was more occupied in literary efforts than in their pastoral care) and in the growing doctrinal tensions within Congregationalism. At the age of fifty-nine, Morse might have dedicated himself to any of these concerns, but he chose instead to embark on a grand tour of distant Indian nations and to compile a report on how the United States should approach them at a critical juncture in its history. Receiving a commission from Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, Morse spent the next two years traveling to and writing about these Indians and styling himself as their likely savior.²

Euro-Americans had exerted a strong influence over the fate of Native Americans for centuries, especially in the aftermath of the American Revolution. But the period after 1815 represented a new era for United States policy toward

² On Morse’s career, see Joseph W. Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse and New England Congregationalism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983); and Richard J. Moss, *The Life of Jedidiah Morse: A Station of Peculiar Exposure* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995).

the Indians.³ The departure of the British had largely relieved Americans of the need for strategic alliances with Indian nations to offset European competition on the continent, and it hastened the incorporation of the Northwest into the United States. Ohio had successfully petitioned for statehood in 1803; now Indiana (1816) and Illinois (1818) followed suit. The removal of the Spanish and the acquisition of Florida after the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819 formalized American control over the continent east of the Mississippi, and Morse's journey was inspired by the extraordinary success of American incorporation that had followed the War of 1812. He was interested in native peoples living on the western fringes of settlement, but he was principally concerned with those Indians – like the remnants of the Six Nations Iroquois in New York – who had been encircled by the extension of state sovereignty.⁴

For Morse and other American clergymen, the problem of the Indians was both religious and political. Since 1811 he had been a member of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), an important interdenominational body that had focused the attention of Americans on the duty of all Christians to promote evangelism overseas.⁵ Morse insisted that Indian conversion was an evangelical priority. Perhaps God had intended Americans to pursue the projects of evangelical and political reformation simultaneously, to exploit the absence of foreign rivals on the continent by converting and civilizing Native Americans in a single initiative. Missionary boards from a number of denominations endorsed this idea after 1815, while politicians saw great advantage in co-opting religious professionals (whose motives were beyond reproach) in the difficult work of Indian “civilizing.” Morse was encouraged in his 1820 commission by America's political elite and was assured that a powerful audience in Washington awaited his proposals with a willingness to listen and the resolve to take action.

Morse's eventual report to Calhoun offered a good deal of detail on the manifold differences between (and within) different Indian nations, but it also gratified the desire of its audience for clear comparisons between Native Americans and whites. While “Indians are of the same nature and original, and of one blood, with ourselves,” and it was “undoubtedly wrong, and highly displeasing to our common Creator” to “look down upon them as an inferior race,”

³ On the prospects for Native Americans in the aftermath of the War of 1812, see Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 5–9.

⁴ Jedidiah Morse, *A Report to the Secretary of War of the United States, on Indian Affairs* (New Haven: S. Converse, 1822), 65.

⁵ For accounts of the resurgence of foreign missions, see John A. Andrew, *Rebuilding the Christian Commonwealth: New England Congregationalists and Foreign Missions, 1800–1830* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976); Clifton Jackson Phillips, *Protestant America and the Pagan World: The First Half-Century of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1810–1860* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969); and William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 43–61.

they had been “degraded” by their proximity to those “enterprizing whites” who had pushed back the frontier. Indians were willing to make the transition to white civilization by restructuring their work and society, but they were assailed by poor whites and aggressive frontiersmen who denied them the time and space to adapt. These unscrupulous whites, “who have the capacity and the disposition to corrupt them,” turned Indians against the United States and encouraged the stereotype that Native Americans could never be civilized.⁶

Against this frustrating backdrop, Morse saw the outcome of the War of 1812 as a real opportunity: Britain would no longer cajole and mislead its former native allies in the Northwest, and so God had created the political climate in which Indians could be brought over “this awful gulf to the solid and safe ground of civilization.” The biggest obstacle to this plan was the avaricious instinct of frontier traders and settlers. Morse shared the paternalistic assumptions of the Monroe administration that interaction between whites and Indians, especially through commerce, had to be carefully managed by the government to ensure that Native Americans were guided toward “civilized” practices and values. Because the vast majority of the territory east of the Mississippi had now been organized under state control, and state legislatures were naturally interested in promoting the interests of white settlers and private traders, Morse and his sponsors in Washington wondered aloud whether Indians like the New York Iroquois might benefit from a removal beyond the bounds of state sovereignty: to the Fox River, for example, in the unorganized territory of Wisconsin. Morse visited Green Bay, 700 miles from the nation’s capital, on a mission to demonstrate that the federal government might exert greater control over its native subjects by moving them further from Washington.⁷

This was Morse’s plan: American agents should relocate the smaller, encircled Indian nations of the East to areas like Green Bay; provide a secure, federally supervised environment in which they could be “taught all branches of knowledge pertaining to civilized man” and thoroughly Christianized, and then allow their society to develop without further interference from whites. Given the vigor of these renovated Indian societies, Morse expected Native Americans not only to succeed but to embrace the United States as it eventually swept over them – rather like the settlers of the old Northwest had done after the Ordinance of 1787. Indians and whites would intermarry, and “the end which the Government has in view will be completely attained[:] They would then be literally of one blood with us, be merged in the nation, and saved from extinction.” The broad interest among white Americans in this “godlike work” demonstrated the providential imprimatur of Morse’s plan: “There is a most remarkable reciprocity of feelings on this subject, which plainly indicates, that the hand of heaven is in it; as no power short of this could ever have produced

⁶ Morse, 82, 66.

⁷ For an example of the federal government’s aversion to private traders, and its vision of managed commerce as an instrument of “civilizing” in the West, see the statement of William H. Crawford, Madison’s secretary of war, on March 13, 1816; reprinted in Francis Paul Prucha, ed., *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, 3rd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 26–28.

such a state of things." Inspired by both the scale of the Indian "problem" and his own ideas for solving it, Morse returned to the East in 1822 with grand ideas, and the conviction that they were sanctioned by God.⁸

When he got back to Washington, Morse struggled to reconcile his clear providential vision with the subtle and shifting debate in the capital over the fate of the Indians. Against the objection of Calhoun and other administration officials, Congress abolished the system of government trading posts that had aspired to monopolize Indian commerce and to nudge Natives toward civilization. Morse set up a pressure group to advance the project of Indian removal – a private organization called the American Society for Promoting the Civilization and General Improvement of the Indian Tribes in the United States – but his project collapsed after only one meeting, in spite of Morse's boast that it represented "the only sure way of securing for our country, the favour and protection of heaven." John Adams and Thomas Jefferson declined Morse's offer of a seat on the board of the society, noting that the fate of the Indians was too significant to be surrendered to a private concern. (James Madison said yes, as he would a decade later when invited to become the president of another nongovernmental organization dedicated to racial separation, the American Colonization Society.)

Morse's society fell victim to the overlapping jurisdictions and quiet abdications that did as much to define Indian policy as any federal initiative in the 1820s. The same men who chafed at the idea of placing Native Americans in the hands of private philanthropists would prove all too willing to allow southern states like Georgia and Alabama to define Indian policy for the nation during the Jackson administration. Morse retreated to New England without accomplishing his dreams of benevolent removal on a massive scale, and he died in 1826 with the Indian problem as intractable as ever. But he had bequeathed an important idea about Indian colonization in the West and a conviction that this removal enjoyed providential sanction. This legacy was attractive to those politicians and clergymen who continued to work for removal in Washington, and who believed – as the unpopular administration of John Quincy Adams was swept from office by Andrew Jackson – that their moment had finally arrived.⁹

What was the providential significance of the American Indians? In the seventeenth century, colonists in New England and Virginia grappled with this question and produced conflicting answers. Were the Indians remnants of the original tribes of Israel, divorced from the biblical narrative but restored to secular

⁸ Morse, 66, 75, 96, 84.

⁹ *The First Annual Report of the American Society for Promoting the Civilization and General Improvement of the Indian Tribes in the United States* (New Haven: S. Converse, 1824), 16, 20–22, 25, 23. For details of Morse's tour and his organizational efforts upon his return to the East, see Moss, 134–38, and Phillips, 199–215. On the shift in policy at the end of Monroe's administration, see Anthony F. C. Wallace, *The Long, Bitter Trail: Andrew Jackson and the Indians* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 39; Dippie, 58, 61; and Monroe's "Special Message to the Senate and House of Representatives," January 27, 1825, in James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789–1897*, 10 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1896–99), 2: 280–82.

history so that they might play a role in the salvation of the world? Or were they Canaanites, subsisting in the American wilderness only until God directed European settlers to supplant them? White Americans disagreed over whether God sought the incorporation of indigenous people within Euro-American settlements, the replacement of Indian communities with white communities, or the effective segregation of Native Americans from whites. From the earliest engagements between whites and Indians in North America, it was clear to European settlers that Native Americans had some bearing on their societal mission. The conflicting priorities of trade, war, and territorial expansion threw up very different answers to the question of the Indians' significance and compromised the search for a unified providential theory of white-Indian relations.¹⁰

The notion that Native Americans were ready and willing to receive Christianity and civilization from Europeans was a major theme of Puritan writing, but the fact of persistent conflict between settlers and natives implied a much bleaker fate for indigenous people. Cotton Mather's introduction to his *Magnalia Christi Americana* best captured the ambivalence in the Puritan mission. In the seven books that followed, Mather would faithfully "report the wonderful displays of His infinite power, . . . wherewith His Divine Providence hath *Irradiated an Indian Wilderness*." Did God intend the "Indian Wilderness" to receive the light of his faith through the conversion of the Indians? Or was that light embodied by the settlers who would take the place of the natives, as God leveled the original inhabitants through disease or helped the Europeans to defeat them in war? A careful reader of the massive *Magnalia* would find materials to support both interpretations. Mather dedicated an entire book to the efforts of missionary John Eliot to proselytize the Indians and another book to the successes of Europeans in their divinely sanctioned wars against the natives. Puritan historians, as they looked back on European victories over Indians and viewed the devastation of Indian communities by disease, found little evidence that God had intended the simple conversion of Native Americans, but they maintained the apparently contradictory positions that providence sought both to supplant the Indians with whites and to convert them to Christianity and civilized life.¹¹

Alongside this religious understanding of the presence of native peoples in America, eighteenth-century thinkers offered a civilizational scheme in which Indians occupied the same axis as whites. According to Montesquieu and his American admirers (including Thomas Jefferson), human societies were organized differently according to the progress of each on a civilizational spectrum. "Primitive" societies – including Native Americans – were different from "civilized" societies only because they had not yet progressed sufficiently to embrace

¹⁰ See Dippie, 9–11, and Chapter 1.

¹¹ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; or, The Ecclesiastical History of New-England, from Its First Planting in the Year 1620, unto the Year of our LORD, 1698* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1702), "Generall Introduction," n.p. [20]. For accounts of Puritan confusion over the role of the Indian, see Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 34–38, 80–85.

civilization. This understanding of human development enabled Jefferson to imagine the eventual civilizing of the Indians, and even the incorporation of Native Americans into the American republic. Unlike blacks, who were tentatively excluded from this scheme by Jefferson, Indians had only to be given sufficient time and suitable circumstances to realize their potential – and become like whites.¹²

Efforts to understand Indians from a providential perspective undoubtedly changed in the twelve decades from the publication of Mather's *Magnalia* to the dispatch of Morse's *Letter to the Secretary of War*, and Jefferson's own views on Native Americans shifted considerably across the course of his lifetime. Nonetheless, the essential problems – of reckoning Euro-American interactions with Indians against God's intentions, or determining Indians' proximity to European modes of thought and behavior – endured throughout this period.¹³ Jedidiah Morse correctly perceived that recent political developments would make these questions still more insistent in the 1820s. Prior to that decade, the colonial and federal governments had largely hidden behind a rhetoric of adherence to treaties and cessions in their relations with Indian nations. Although Euro-Americans asked questions that suggested that they were ultimately in control of Indians' fate, successive white governments insisted on the formality of negotiations and the supposed legality of treaty making, even as they forced land cessions or gave support to armed efforts to dispossess Indians on the frontier. By the 1820s, Morse argued, the United States could no longer deny its controlling influence over the Indians; indeed, Morse presented this as a providential duty, a divine mission that the United States was called upon to perform.

Even before Morse's journey to the Northwest, white Americans were determined to resolve the problem of the Indians and their place within the United States. Washington's newspaper of record, the *National Intelligence*, noted in 1817 that the conclusion of the war with Britain had returned Americans' focus to their Indian neighbors:

Now that tranquility reigns in our borders, and our prosperous and happy country is enjoying all the luxury resulting from the fruition of such a state, it is not amongst the least pleasing events that are happening, to witness the sympathy which is excited towards the INDIANS on our territory. It may be, that to their exclusion from our society is to be attributed, in good part, the slowness with which we have approached to an investigation of their state.

¹² On the "improvability" of the Indians, see Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian*, 38–49. Jefferson's discussion of Native Americans in *Notes on the State of Virginia* is analyzed and contextualized in a broader Enlightenment milieu by Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Jefferson and the Indians: The Tragic Fate of the First Americans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 75–129.

¹³ Even the fanciful identification of Native Americans as Jewish persisted into the nineteenth century, a claim made by both whites and some Indians. See, for example, George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*, 2 vols. (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1841), 2: 236; and William Apress, "The Indians: The Ten Lost Tribes," in Barry O'Connell, ed., *On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writings of William Apress* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 113–15.

The editorial happily noted “the lights of civilization and christianity twinkling in the desert” and shared the hope that “the day must at last come, when our Indians will form a portion of our great ‘American family of Freemen,’ . . . when the darkness of the wilderness will be lighted up by a general blaze of illumination.”¹⁴ In an article from the following year, the *Intelligencer* suggested that Americans were “*specially* entrusted with the care and disposition of these poor ignorant creatures,” given the planting of white settlements “by Providence in the midst of those children of the forests.”¹⁵

In articulating this civilizing mission, the question remained: how best could white Americans bring Christianity or civilized values to Indians? Jedidiah Morse proposed that the government embed a white agent into each Indian community as an advertisement for the benefits of civilization.¹⁶ The various missionary societies, on the other hand, placed an emphasis on conversion to Christianity as a prerequisite for social and cultural progress.¹⁷ This focus on missions reflected a general interest in global evangelizing that followed the War of 1812, complying with what the *American Baptist Magazine* described in 1828 as “the mandate of Heaven – Reform and christianize the world!”¹⁸ Missionary groups also brought a specifically American focus to their proposals for Indian conversion. Perhaps God had insisted that the “tide of emigration” that had swept up so many whites should be accompanied by a genuine commitment to Christianize Indians and frontier whites, addressing “the religious wants of the adventurous voyager and the fearless man of the woods.” This devotion to frontier evangelism would cohere with historical providentialism, spawning “another Plymouth Colony, which shall extend its beneficent influences over millions of intelligent, enlightened and happy men, through successive ages to the end of the world.”¹⁹ The Presbyterian missionary board that advanced these visions even suggested in 1830 that Indian missions would set the tone for all of its foreign evangelizing.²⁰

But should missionaries approach the Indians as foreigners, like the Africans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders who were simultaneously targeted for American evangelism? Or as prospective citizens of the United States?²¹ A few

¹⁴ *National Intelligencer*, October 25, 1817, 2.

¹⁵ *National Intelligencer*, August 28, 1818, 2.

¹⁶ Morse, 58–59.

¹⁷ Debates over the primacy of “civilizing” or “Christianizing” Indians were common in both the religious and secular press: see, for instance, “Indian Language and Condition,” *American Quarterly Review* (Philadelphia) 3, no. 6 (June 1828): 391–422, at 421–22.

¹⁸ *American Baptist Magazine* 8, no. 1 (January 1828): 25–27, at 26.

¹⁹ *Missionary Herald* 23, no. 12 (December 1827): 396–98.

²⁰ *Missionary Herald* 26, no. 1 (January 1830): 2.

²¹ For an account of the debates within the missionary organizations over the political meaning of this mission, see William G. McLoughlin, “The Missionaries’ Dilemma,” in Walter H. Conser, ed., *The Cherokees and Christianity, 1794–1870: Essays on Acculturation and Cultural Persistence* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 34–49. On the differences between Presbyterian and Baptist missionary strategies, see McLoughlin, “Two Boston Missionaries,” in *ibid.*, 50–90. Robert J. Berkhofer suggests that many denominations conceived of “Christianizing”

ministers – like the Methodist Noah Levings – committed themselves (and their denomination) to a project of Indian nation building in the West. Among the “visions of the future” that Levings offered his fellow Methodists at a missionary conference in 1828, he imagined “at no very distant period our red brethren erected into independent states in imitation of this vast republic.”²² The most influential figure in this debate over the future of Native Americans took a different course. Isaac McCoy, a Baptist minister from Pennsylvania, had been involved in missionary work among Native Americans in Indiana and Michigan since 1817. While Jedidiah Morse had asked John C. Calhoun to endorse his voluntary society to tackle Indian issues, McCoy approached the secretary of war in 1824 with a much simpler request: could the government remove eastern Indian nations to a location in the far West, beyond the Mississippi River?²³

While McCoy continued his active missionary work, he took up the cause of lobbying the government and Congress during the late 1820s. Having persuaded the Baptist hierarchy to endorse his views on the necessity of removal, he dedicated himself to making this case throughout the East and especially in Washington.²⁴ Bringing an extraordinary zeal to his efforts, McCoy enjoyed far greater access to politicians than Morse or the other devotees of Indian missions. His arguments were familiar. Indians were in no way inferior to Europeans and enjoyed impeccable claims to their current lands, but they required a special area in the American West in which they might develop without the corrupting influence of frontier whites, “the very filth of civilized society.” McCoy mapped the relative degradation of Indians onto their proximity to white settlements, finding that “the degrees of declension and misery are in a regular gradation from those tribes which have a dying remnant, up to those who are but just beginning to melt down by the approach of the whites.” Accepting that the progress of white settlement was inevitable, McCoy believed that a simple relocation of all Native American communities would provide the basis for their conversion to Christianity and civilized ways.²⁵

McCoy himself was adamant that “colonization” be used to describe his proposals, rather than “removal.” He leaned on the concept of “degradation” to explain the supposed inferiority of Native Americans, embracing racial equality

and “civilizing” missions as basically compatible, if not identical: *Salvation and the Savage* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 5–15.

²² *Christian Advocate*, May 2, 1828, 138.

²³ See George A. Schultz, *An Indian Canaan: Isaac McCoy and the Vision of an Indian State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972); William McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries, 1789–1839* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 267–84; and Emory J. Lyons, *Isaac McCoy: His Plan of and Work for Indian Colonization*, Fort Hays Kansas State College Studies, History Series No. 1 (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Plant, 1945).

²⁴ Schultz, 123–40. On McCoy’s willingness to lobby Congress in support of Indian removal, see Ronald N. Satz, *American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 17–18, 21; and Berkhofer, *Salvation and the Savage*, 101–2.

²⁵ Isaac McCoy, *Remarks on the Practicability of Indian Reform, Embracing their Colonization* (Boston: Lincoln and Edmonds, 1827), 14, 25.

in the abstract while pushing the view that Indians were corrupted by their current environment. The territory to the west of the Mississippi would allow Indians not only to develop but, eventually, to resemble the white population of the United States:

The colonizing plan proposes to place the Aborigines on the same footing as ourselves; to place before them the same opportunities of improvement that we enjoy, and the same inducements to improve those opportunities. The result, therefore, cannot be doubtful. The colony would commence and improve, much after the manner of all new settlements of whites, which have been begun and carried forward, under favourable circumstances.

Thus McCoy rejected an older dichotomy between civilizing the Indians and removing them, suggesting that the former was entirely dependent on the latter. His pamphlet concluded with a direct question: "Shall we save them or no?" In case his audience was still hesitant, he reminded them that "Heaven and humanity direct the answer!"²⁶

McCoy's pamphlet and his ideas played a significant role in bolstering the federal government's shift toward a broad and open removal policy. Government officials and congressmen could present McCoy as dedicated and sincere, a figure with first-hand knowledge of what was necessary to Christianize and civilize Native Americans.²⁷ But his "solution" left many unresolved questions. In the first instance, the colonization plan, supposedly necessary to the survival of the Indians, attracted support from many whites who were not previously known for their advocacy of Native Americans, especially political figures from Georgia and Alabama who had been trying to remove local Indian communities for decades. Second, his proposal did not describe how this new Indian territory would be protected from further white encroachment, in spite of what McCoy himself decried as "an almost insatiable thirst for the extension of our settlements."²⁸ McCoy believed that the Indians needed missionaries more than land – that the provision of a stable ground for evangelism was more important than the maintenance of Indian territorial claims against white usurpers. He was less interested in political solutions and proved reluctant to support a separate Indian state or to endorse Jedidiah Morse's proposal that Native Americans in these Western communities become "literally of one blood with us." McCoy left Indians in a societal limbo, promising neither U.S. citizenship nor an independent Indian nation in the West.

McCoy claimed that God had endorsed his plan, but he did nothing to address the long-standing uncertainty over the providential status of Native Americans. While he had presented the "colonization" of Native Americans as benevolent, the fact of the Indians' original access to the entire American continent complicated efforts to argue that God had always intended them to

²⁶ Ibid., 31, 47.

²⁷ McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 267–68.

²⁸ McCoy, 43.

be removed. Conversely, the idea that God intended whites to supplant Indians, and that the march of civilization was essentially the process by which nonwhite peoples vanished entirely, would alienate those “benevolent” whites to whom McCoy’s apparently altruistic proposals were so attractive. The proponents of Indian removal divided over how to reconcile their plan with God’s will and how to persuade white Americans to accept their providential interpretations. McCoy, meanwhile, helped less scrupulous whites to appropriate his arguments for their own ends.

2. “A Divine Impulse”: Removing Blacks

The removal of blacks, like the plan to “colonize” Indians after 1815, was pioneered by northern clergymen. Around the same time that Jedidiah Morse adopted the cause of the northwestern Indians in the years after the War of 1812, New Jersey Presbyterian Robert Finley became interested in America’s black population and the possibility that it might be relocated outside the United States. In November 1816 Finley called a meeting in Princeton, New Jersey, to discuss the possibility of African colonization; the following month, armed with an eight-page essay that described his plan, Finley traveled to Washington to look for powerful supporters. With the aid of his brother-in-law, who served as the clerk to the Supreme Court, Finley quickly found an audience for his ideas. He met with journalists, congressional representatives, and even James Madison. Within weeks, he had established the American Colonization Society, obtained the use of the House of Representatives as the society’s meeting place, and had recruited the *National Intelligencer* as a promoter of African colonization. By the time of the first annual meeting of the ACS in January 1818, some of the most prominent politicians in the nation – including Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, and President James Monroe – had offered their support to the society and its efforts.²⁹

The key to Finley’s proposal was that colonization would initially target northern free blacks, rather than southern slaves. While Finley sincerely hoped that the ACS could help to break the grip of slavery on the southern states, he argued that the first priority should be the removal of free black communities in northern cities that were acutely affected by prejudice and indigence. This meant that colonization appealed not only to those whites who supported the gradual abolition of slavery but also to slave owners who viewed northern free blacks as an unwelcome example of black freedom within the United States.³⁰

²⁹ Robert Finley, *Thoughts on the Colonization of Free Blacks* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1816).

³⁰ The most recent full-length study of the American Colonization Society in its formative period is P. J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement, 1816–1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961). Although Staudenraus offers a useful narrative history of the society, he pays less attention to its rhetorical strategies and ideological framework. George Fredrickson’s *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) offers a provocative interpretation of colonization, identifying the impulses toward free black removal in Federalist and Presbyterian/Congregationalist

The ambiguity of Finley's plan, in terms of its long-term impact on American slavery, was what made African colonization so appealing – especially to politicians, who saw an opportunity to pay lip service to the eventual inevitability of abolition but to push the difficult business of emancipation into the distant future. Three of the four presidential candidates in the 1824 election strongly supported the ACS. (The only dissenter was the victor, John Quincy Adams.) In 1833 the eighty-two-year-old James Madison became the society's president. He was succeeded at his death by Henry Clay, one of the leading lights of the ACS since its founding. The cause of colonization was advanced by thousands of active supporters from Maine to Georgia, and in the 1820s and early 1830s it was the most popular and respectable solution to the problem of racial diversity in America.³¹

It would be easy to conclude that the ACS simply hoodwinked northerners who were sincere in their hopes for the abolition of slavery. In fact, the strong support for the society in the North derived from the complex and inchoate nature of racism in the two decades after 1815. The vast majority of northerners had no interest whatever in creating a mixed-race society in which blacks and whites would have equal rights. At the same time, they lacked a formal, scientific racism that might explain the inferior social position to which they had assigned the free blacks in their midst. While many northern whites were sincere in their desire to purge the United States of slavery, they were firm supporters of Finley's proposal that free blacks should also be removed. One prominent supporter of the ACS was New Jersey lawyer Peter Vroom, who in 1827 (a year before he became the state's governor) broached the dilemma facing whites at a colonization meeting in Princeton. "Shall we put [free blacks] on a footing with ourselves, and accord to them equal rights?" he asked. "Strict justice and the spirit of our free institutions would seem to require it – and yet it is utterly out of the question. None but enthusiasts would ever think of it. The consequence is, we are driven to the most absurd inconsistencies, and compelled to do violence to our dearest political principles." Vroom's struggle to

thinking and locating the principal obstacle to the achievement of the plans in a new individualism embodied by Jacksonian opponents of government action and New England abolitionists after 1830. For other accounts, see Lawrence J. Friedman, *Inventors of the Promised Land* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 185–254; and Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 192–98, 212–17. In spite of its prominence in the 1820s and 1830s, the Colonization Society has been overlooked in some important studies of the development of racial prejudice in America: Reginald Horsman's *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981) makes no reference to the ACS whatever; Ronald Takaki's *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000; originally published 1979) addresses colonization only in the context of Jefferson's thinking on the issue; and Larry E. Tise's *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987) makes only passing reference to colonization, even though its northern support base is germane to the general thesis of his book.

³¹ On the diverse constituencies that supported the ACS, see Staudenraus, 104–49.

reconcile his discriminatory impulse with a desire not to appear discriminatory aptly summarizes the racial thinking of the ACS: a racist precept couched as a benevolent gesture, and a prejudicial mind-set unwilling wholly to grasp the language of prejudice.³²

The work of moving America's entire free black population to Africa – let alone its slaves – was daunting in prospect. More than a quarter of a million free blacks lived in the United States in 1820, an enormous number of people to relocate and to provide for in a distant colony. In addition, Robert Finley and the managers of the ACS were aware of the disparate white constituency for their proposals and realized that slaveholding southerners and antislavery northerners were unlikely partners in this effort. This combination of pressures – the desire to make colonization seem practical and the need to retain a fragile coalition across the Mason-Dixon line – led the ACS to emphasize providence over politics. From its earliest months, the managers and supporters of the ACS attempted to depoliticize colonization by arguing that God was the architect of the removal plans. One tactic for achieving this was to suggest that Americans were living in a special moment of world history: that, as Finley put it in his original 1816 pamphlet, “the period in which we live is big with great events.” During the society's formative years between 1816 and 1820, its backers looked beyond America's borders – to the recent defeat of Napoleon, for example, or the revolutions in Latin America – for evidence that God's plan for humanity had reached a moment of reckoning. “It can no longer be made a question whether the elevation of the African race is a part of the new order of things,” insisted one ACS supporter in New York in 1817. “The providence of God has declared it.” Americans' duty, then, was to “behold the sign and bow to the mandate of God.”³³

³² Peter Vroom, “Address to the New Jersey Colonization Society,” *Proceedings of the Third Annual Meeting* (Princeton: D. A. Borrenstein, 1827), 18. The annual meeting took place in Princeton on August 15, 1827. Vroom's reluctance to intellectualize black inferiority bears out the arguments of Winthrop Jordan and George Fredrickson that a pseudoscientific racism did not emerge until later in the nineteenth century. ACS proponents frequently fell back upon instinctual white prejudices as they outlined the impossibility of racial coexistence in the United States, stirring an “emotional antipathy,” in Fredrickson's term, to the idea of living alongside African Americans. The colonizationists' efforts to avoid outright racist language suggest that colonization was neither the expression of a fully developed and confident white racism (as Ronald Takaki suggests in *Iron Cages*) nor the judicious tactic of racial “realists” in the North, who sought to demonstrate their level-headedness by responding to the realities of white prejudice and removing free blacks (as George Fredrickson suggests in *The Black Image in the White Mind*). Rather, colonizationists embraced extremely romantic views of black prospects in Africa and tried to suppress the realities of racial prejudice (whether expressed confidently or resignedly) in the United States.

³³ Finley, 8. *National Intelligencer*, November 27, 1818, 2; American Colonization Society, *The Fourth Annual Report of the American Society for the Colonizing of the Free People of Colour of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1821), 58; and Edward Griffin, *A Plea for Africa: A Sermon, Preached October 26, 1817, in the First Presbyterian Church in the City of New-York* (New York: Gould, 1817), 30.

The more enduring providential strategy on the part of the ACS was to link colonization directly to God's plan for the United States. The society achieved notable successes in its first few years of operation, persuading the Monroe administration to facilitate the purchase of the new colony of Liberia in 1820. But the lukewarm response of Monroe's successor, John Quincy Adams, persuaded the society's managers to renew their efforts to secure public approval for colonization. To this end, the ACS began to issue a monthly magazine, the *African Repository*, from 1825. Colonization supporters also tried to link the fate of Liberia directly to the promise and prospects of the United States. Maintaining that this link between America and Africa was organic and self-evident, ACS publications and addresses urged Americans to take up the cause of Liberia on the Fourth of July. From 1825 onward, the ACS persuaded hundreds of ministers and orators to offer sermons and addresses on Independence Day supporting colonization and also to take up collections for the society.³⁴ By the early 1830s, these Independence Day orations had become the society's major source of funding, and thousands of Americans had become accustomed to hearing the redemption of Africa as the latest chapter in America's providential story.³⁵

Ralph Gurley, a Presbyterian minister who became the secretary and effective leader of the ACS in 1825, set the tone for these orations in an independence address delivered that year in Washington. Gurley noted the tendency of Fourth of July orators to range across American history from the earliest colonial settlements, and to "trace up that line of events which, whether produced by human effort, or more strikingly by Providence, have given us our moral and political elevation." This glorious history of divine favor, he warned, should not be allowed to nourish complacency or insularity. Americans had now both to assist their own unhappy black population and to help the millions of people beyond the borders of the United States who labored under despotism or ignorance. For Gurley and other ACS orators, African colonization was the next

³⁴ Although July 4, 1826, marked fifty years from the date of the Declaration of Independence, the fiftieth occurrence of Independence Day prompted widespread celebration of the "jubilee" in July 1825.

³⁵ American Colonization Society, *The Second Annual Report of the American Society for the Colonizing of the Free People of Colour of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1819), 18. On Adams's opposition, see Staudenraus, 52–53. In 1833 the *African Repository* announced that "[m]uch of what the Society has hitherto done towards effecting the purposes for which it was organized, is attributable to means afforded to it by pecuniary aid collected on the Fourth of July." "Fourth of July Contributions," *African Repository* 9, no. 4 (June 1833): 97. On the society's interest in harnessing independence celebrations, see David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1997), 302–4. The ACS began seriously promoting Independence Day collections in 1825, coinciding with the launch of the new colonization magazine, the *African Repository*. In the third issue, the society presented an anthology of local calls for Fourth of July colonization collections, including extracts from newspapers in New England, Baltimore, and Georgia. *African Repository* 1, no. 3 (May 1825): 91–92.

stage in America's progressive destiny. One independence orator offered three verbal "paintings" in an 1829 address, depicting the Crucifixion, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and ("from the prophet's pencil") the regeneration of Africa by Liberian colonists. For the promoters of the ACS, these visions of black relocation and resurgence in Africa promised both to indulge the general interest in foreign missions and to provide a bright new episode in America's own favored history.³⁶

Providential language was particularly helpful in making the ACS plan for a mass relocation seem practicable. In his 1816 pamphlet, Robert Finley countered the claim that some Americans would dismiss his scheme as "wholly visionary" by asserting that God could realize any undertaking. Henry Clay argued at the annual meeting of the society in 1818 that "nothing is beyond the power of those who, in the pursuit of a just purpose, approved by good men, and sanctioned by Providence, boldly and resolutely determine to command success." Washington's *National Intelligencer* spoke of the colonization effort as a "majestic river" that was propelled by God; it fell to humans to "direct the current," but Providence had determined that the river was unstoppable.³⁷ This rhetoric sustained the ACS through some difficult times, given the early travails of the Liberian colonists and the ongoing wariness of the federal government toward the effort. According to one colonization supporter writing in the *Richmond Inquirer* in 1827, any reluctance on the part of Americans to embrace colonization derived simply from "ignorance of the purposes of Providence."³⁸ In 1833, as the society suffered a serious credit crunch, the *African Repository* reassured subscribers that the providential nature of the effort was a guarantee against any temporary financial difficulties.³⁹ Ralph Gurley, who edited the magazine from its first issue in 1825, seems to have taken a special pleasure in publishing any correspondence that acknowledged the marriage of divine and human agency that supposedly inspired the ACS. "The plan of Colonization is of heavenly origin, has by heaven been prospered, and the gates of hell shall never prevail against it," declared a South Carolina supporter in a

³⁶ Ralph R. Gurley, *A Discourse Delivered on the Fourth of July, 1825, in the City of Washington* (Washington, D.C.: Gales and Seaton, 1825), 5; and G. V. H. Forbes, "Independence Oration," reprinted in *Christian Advocate*, July 31, 1829.

³⁷ Finley, 8. *First Annual Report*, 9; and *National Intelligencer*, October 31, 1817, 2.

³⁸ This extract came from a long debate in the *Inquirer* between "Caius Gracchus," who questioned the viability of a private colonization society, and "Opimius," who stressed that the American Colonization Society could, with God's assistance, carry out this mighty work. *African Repository* 3, no. 1 (March 1827): 3–5.

³⁹ "The Crisis," *African Repository* 9, no. 7 (September 1833): 193–200, at 199. William Lloyd Garrison and other abolitionists were energized by the news of the society's difficulties – Garrison printed "A DEBT OF \$46,000: DOWNFAL OF THE HANDMAID OF SLAVERY," or versions of this slogan, in the *Liberator* throughout 1834. See, for example, *Liberator*, February 8, 1834, 22. A Philadelphia abolitionist, "Humanitas," used the debt to argue (sardonically) for an "Africa-Americano Re-Colonization Society" to rescue those blacks who had already journeyed to the struggling colony. *Liberator*, May 10, 1834, 73.

letter to the ACS in 1826. "Actuated by this belief, I contribute to its aid the enclosed mite, \$5."⁴⁰

Providence was also a useful tool for explaining the difficulties experienced by the early Liberian colonists. The first settlers struggled to make peace with indigenous Africans and to accept the society's demand that its agents should control every aspect of the colony's management. The principal ACS representative, New England schoolteacher Jehudi Ashmun, was forced to leave Liberia temporarily after a coup engineered by the first colonists in 1824. Ralph Gurley himself traveled to Africa in 1824 to reinstate Ashmun and restore ACS control, but in the following years problems persisted.⁴¹ In response, Gurley and other ACS supporters emphasized the need to look beyond immediate disappointments and to have confidence in the overarching providential course. Perhaps God intended the advocates of Liberia to struggle through trials before achieving success; after all, as Gurley noted in his 1825 independence address, "in the dispensations of Providence, confusion is succeeded by order, and light bursts forth from the depths of darkness."⁴² The society interpreted every indication of the colony's progress as a sign of God's approval and, when times were good, the ACS board of managers made the dubious claim that "had it been the pleasure of the Almighty to frown upon their efforts . . . they were prepared to check their ardor into submission, and to leave their country and a cause that so awfully concerns it, to the judgments or the mercies of God." In reality, providential interpretation was necessarily inconsistent, and the ACS managers looked for divine encouragement irrespective of setbacks. God's purpose was alternately legible or inscrutable, depending on the fortunes of the Colonization Society.⁴³

Supporters of colonization even drew upon the Old Testament in arguing that the initial obstacles would eventually be overcome. Theodore Frelinghuysen, the U.S. senator from New Jersey, produced the book of Exodus to argue that the Jews under Moses had been "put to the trials which await colonization."⁴⁴ New Haven minister Leonard Bacon claimed in an address that he "had read of a Colonization Society that undertook three thousand years ago, to colonize in the land of their fathers, three millions of slaves. The President of that Society was one Moses." With no apparent irony, Bacon added that "there arose up an Anti-Colonization Society, the President of which was one Pharaoh."⁴⁵ While

⁴⁰ *African Repository* 2, no. 9 (November 1826): 285.

⁴¹ Staudenraus, 82–103.

⁴² Gurley, *Discourse Delivered on the Fourth of July*, 19.

⁴³ American Colonization Society, *The Fifth Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1822), 7.

⁴⁴ Frelinghuysen made these remarks at a meeting of the New York colonization auxiliary (also attended by Ralph Gurley) in Murray Street Church, December 2, 1835; the meeting was noted in the *African Repository* 12, no. 2 (February 1836): 62.

⁴⁵ Leonard Bacon, "Anti-Colonizationism in Old Times," delivered May 22, 1834, before the Connecticut Colonization Society; reprinted in *African Repository* 10, no. 6 (August 1834): 189.

these reversions to the Bible came perilously close to identifying the United States with Egypt, this hardly deterred elaborate analogies. Ohio congressman Elisha Whittlesey, in an independence oration of 1833, compared Robert Finley to Moses. Finley had died in 1817 and was thus “not permitted, like Moses from Mount Nebo, to see the godly land with his natural eyes; but like Moses, he died with the full assurance, that Africa would be reclaimed and redeemed.” No matter that Finley had retired from the colonization effort soon after the founding of the ACS, or that he had actually died from malaria after accepting a lucrative post as president of the University of Georgia. In the rhetoric of colonization’s boosters, he had spent his last days sailing up Cape Mesurado with a serene smile on his face, rather than enduring mosquitoes and recalcitrant faculty in Athens.⁴⁶

A more plausible candidate for beatification was Jehudi Ashmun, the ACS agent in Liberia after 1823. After being temporarily expelled from his own colony by restive settlers during his first year in charge, Ashmun returned to manage Liberia until his death from disease in 1828. As the colony prospered over these years, Ralph Gurley and others presented their agent as a kind of Liberian John Winthrop. Ashmun’s unorthodox background was conducive to this effort. He had spent his early years wandering through the United States, drawn to a number of different professions and places but unable to find success in any of them. On a whim, he had applied for the thankless task of managing the Liberian colony. He overcame those initial difficulties to lead the colonists through a relatively successful period of development, and he died as a martyr to the cause of colonization.⁴⁷ In numerous eulogies, ACS supporters depicted Ashmun as a humble and willing instrument of providence, a man who had turned over his personal destiny to the calling for which God had prepared him. After Ashmun’s premature death, Gurley himself prepared a 400-page hagiography that placed particular emphasis on providential involvement. Ashmun was guided throughout his career by the “invisible hand” of God, argued Gurley, who dedicated one chapter of the biography to “The Doctrine of Divine Providence” and “Mr. Ashmun’s belief in it.” The providential origins of Liberia, and the obvious manifestations of God’s approval in the miraculous life of Ashmun, enabled Gurley to state with confidence that “This scheme of Colonization is innoxious, it tends to unite public sentiment, [and] to strengthen the Union.”⁴⁸

Ashmun’s significance lay in his utter ordinariness. In Gurley’s narration, the humble agent became a (white) American everyman, a reluctant savior who did not intend to redeem Africa but, thanks to providential design and an eventual

⁴⁶ Elisha Whittlesey, *An Address, Delivered before the Tallmadge Colonization Society, on the Fourth of July, 1833* (Ravenna: Office of the Ohio Star, 1833), 11.

⁴⁷ In fact, it seems that Ashmun accepted the post of ACS agent in Liberia partly from a desire to escape from his many creditors in the United States, a fact that Gurley creatively finesses in his biography of Ashmun: Ralph Gurley, *Life of Jehudi Ashmun, Late Colonial Agent in Liberia* (Washington, D.C.: James C. Dunn, 1835), 119.

⁴⁸ Gurley, *Life of Jehudi Ashmun*, 72, 149, 287, 277.

willingness to recognize his destiny, emerged as an instrument of God. Like his biblical predecessors, Ashmun was given a Damascene moment at which the full extent of God's scheme became apparent. Soon after his return to the colony in 1825, the young agent climbed the hills above Cape Mesurado, looked down toward Monrovia and back into the African interior, and glimpsed the beauty of God's plan for Africa. Gurley moved into the present tense for this part: "The Book of Providence is now unsealed," he reported breathlessly. Liberia was not simply a solution to America's problem of racial diversity but the instrument for the political and religious redemption of the entire African continent. God had chosen Ashmun "to build a city of righteousness on that shore of oppression," and from his high vantage point on that bright April morning Ashmun experienced an epiphany in which "his welfare and usefulness were indissolubly united."⁴⁹

This was perhaps the most powerful providential argument about Liberia: that it represented the first stage in a divine scheme by which Africa would be rescued from the "ignorance" and "darkness" to which it had apparently been consigned for centuries. The model for this argument dated back to the earliest ACS meetings. In January 1818, Baltimore congressman Robert Goodloe Harper, who coined the name Liberia for the new settlement, urged his audience in the House of Representatives to "cast your eyes on this vast continent" and on the "mighty river" (presumably the Congo, more than fifteen hundred miles from Liberia) that "rolls its water through vast regions inhabited by those tribes, and seems destined, by an all-wise and beneficent Providence, one day to connect them with each other, and all of them with the rest of the world." In Harper's vision, American blacks would "extend gradually into the interior," meet and improve indigenous Africans, and enlighten the entire continent.⁵⁰ Ralph Gurley, who made himself available to debate antislavery campaigners and abolitionists even when the tide turned against colonization in the 1830s, liked to revert to this providential vision of Africa's redemption when he found himself besieged on the podium. In 1835 one Massachusetts abolitionist railed against Gurley's contention that free black "degradation" in America was providentially decreed. "Does the gentleman mean that it is a state of things which God approves?" According to the acerbic report on this debate in the *Liberator*, Gurley ignored the question and instead "enlarged in a glowing description of the future glories of Africa." Like many colonization supporters, Gurley hoped that Liberia would trump the debate over race and slavery in the United States. The regeneration of Africa was more important even than the fate of blacks in America – hence Gurley's bizarre remark in the same debate that, by encouraging blacks to fight for freedom within the United States, "the abolitionists appeal to the selfishness of our colored brethren." With Liberia established not

⁴⁹ Ibid., 249, 149.

⁵⁰ *First Annual Report*, 21–22. Harper's address was reprinted in the *National Intelligencer*, January 15, 1818, 2–3.

as an instrument for racial removal but as the providential means of redeeming an entire continent, colonization supporters could turn from debating slavery to promoting an African empire.⁵¹

In the speeches of colonization supporters, Liberia became a way of reconciling two separate projections of America's providential mission: the rapid westward expansion that was pushing white settlement far beyond the Appalachians, and the hoped-for eastward influence that would carry American ideas back to the Old World. According to Leonard Bacon, the eulogist at Jehudi Ashmun's funeral in 1828, the African "wilderness" would, "like our own wide forests of the west, vanish . . . before the march of civilized and Christian man." Villages, plantations, and cities would emerge, and the "pagan tribes" would "catch the light of civilization."⁵² As with the rhetoric surrounding western expansion, ACS supporters envisaged that the American settlers would convert and improve indigenous Africans along the way. (Ralph Gurley, in his biography of Ashmun, produced a backup plan should the natives refuse the American gifts of civilization and religion: "Should this hope be disappointed, [Ashmun] saw that a nobler race would occupy their places, adorning a land already abounding in the gifts of Providence.")⁵³ Liberia would become a mirror of the United States, declared Henry Clay in 1829, spreading its influence through Africa and creating a "confederation of Republican States" that would "thunder forth in behalf of the rights of man, and mak[e] tyrants tremble on their thrones."⁵⁴

For some colonization supporters, Liberia promised to displace even its American parent in the providential scheme. A Boston orator suggested in 1827 that George Berkeley's "Star of Empire" would now turn back upon "the darkened land of the East"; critics of colonization should remember that Berkeley's unlikely prophecies about America had eventually been fulfilled.⁵⁵ According to Theodore Frelinghuysen (and other ACS backers), Liberia was "like the star in the East, which announced the Saviour to the astonished magi." Other nations would be transfixed by the "illuminated spot" of Africa, which would indicate to the rest of the world that "man's universal redemption is

⁵¹ This debate took place at Julien Hall in Boston on July 20, 1835, and was reported in the *Liberator*, August 22, 1835, 134.

⁵² Ashmun's funeral took place at the Center Church, New Haven, on August 27, 1828. Bacon's eulogy was reprinted in American Colonization Society, *The Twelfth Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1829), 45–46.

⁵³ Gurley, *Life of Jehudi Ashmun*, 229.

⁵⁴ Henry Clay, "Address before the Colonization Society of Kentucky," December 17, 1829, reprinted in *African Repository* 5, no. 1 (March 1830): 23.

⁵⁵ The reference was made by a "Mr. Knapp" at the 1827 annual meeting, reprinted in *Tenth Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1827), 11. There is no listing of a Boston Knapp in the ACS directories of auxiliary officers or donors. The speaker may have been Samuel Lorenzo Knapp, a Boston lawyer and literary figure who moved to Washington around this time to edit the *National Journal*.

sure.”⁵⁶ Many ACS addresses offered the examples of Plymouth and Massachusetts as a template for the settlement of West Africa. New Jersey district attorney Lucius Elmer told his local ACS meeting in 1825 that “a small band of pilgrims” had managed to conquer the entire North American continent, “extending from the Bay of Fundy to the Gulph of Mexico, and from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean.” The Liberian settlers, then, might easily “prove the commencement of a great nation of civilized and Christian blacks” because they enjoyed the same “blessing of Heaven.” Presbyterian minister Alexander Proudfit of New York “deduced a hope for the children of Africa” from the example of “our own pilgrim fathers.” Even the initial setbacks experienced by the Liberian colonists were, in the words of another New York minister, “not so great as those encountered by the first settlers of our own country.” Lucius Elmer made the most direct connection: “What America *was* when our fathers first landed, Africa *is*.” The black colonists could take inspiration from the Pilgrims’ example and might even surpass the achievements of American settlers.⁵⁷

As with the efforts to map the story of a black migration to Africa onto the Jews’ exodus from Egypt, colonization supporters did not extend the analogy between Liberia and New England and conclude that the United States had followed the unfortunate path of Caroline England by forcing its godly inhabitants into exile across the ocean.⁵⁸ Instead, the ACS and its allies developed another, audacious argument about slavery, providence, and American history. In his 1816 pamphlet, Robert Finley wondered whether God “had suffered so great an evil to exist as African slavery, that in a land of civil liberty and religious knowledge, thousands and tens of thousands might at the appointed time be prepared to return, and be the great instrument of spreading peace and happiness.” According to this logic, both white Americans and free blacks could be grateful to God for slavery, which would seem awful only when considered in isolation from the intended transfiguration of Africa.⁵⁹

This argument was both self-serving and extraordinarily attractive, allowing white Americans to choose precisely the level of contrition they wished to offer to blacks. A Virginia correspondent told the *National Intelligencer* in

⁵⁶ For Frelinghuysen’s comments, see American Colonization Society, *The Seventeenth Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1834), xiii–xiv.

⁵⁷ For Elmer’s remarks, see New Jersey Colonization Society, *Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting* (Princeton: D. A. Borrenstein, 1825), 16, 30. Proudfit’s comments were recorded in *The Twenty-First Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1837), 25. On Plymouth and Jamestown as a guarantor of Liberian success, see also “Colonization,” *National Intelligencer*, February 18, 1818, 3: “Under how much more favorable auspices would a colony of this kind be established in Africa, than the first attempt to plant a colony in the country that we inhabit!”

⁵⁸ The analogy was eventually extended by the Ohio antislavery newspaper, the *Philanthropist*: “Rather strange, one would think, that while America is an asylum for Europe’s victims of oppression, Africa should be sought as an asylum from American oppression!” Reprinted in *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 5th ser., 1, no. 2 (October 1837): 124.

⁵⁹ Finley, 8.

1819 that Africans should “bless the unsearchable providence of God, [who] sent away their children into bondage for a time, that they might return laden with blessings so numerous.”⁶⁰ Congressman Elisha Whittlesey, by comparison, suggested in 1833 that God’s reasons for the “abduction of the Africans” were “beyond our finite comprehension,” but that Americans should “confide in his wisdom and remain firm in the belief that his purposes will be accomplished.”⁶¹ Even some slave owners (who worried that the providential rationale for slavery might seem a little too convenient) joined Whittlesey and other antislavery advocates in arguing that God had produced a noble outcome from man’s evil intentions.⁶² One Maryland orator urged free blacks in 1832 to confront the “authors of their injuries (their owners) as Joseph approached his brothers in Genesis: ‘Ye thought evil against me, but *God* meant it unto good.’”⁶³ Regardless of what degree of responsibility these speakers attributed to white Americans, they agreed both that slavery was an essential part of God’s providential plan for America and that God had (in the words of Lyman Beecher) “called us to colonize Africa, as significantly as he called our fathers to colonize at Plymouth.” The reward for following the providential direction, beyond the maintenance of divine favor, was outlined by Ralph Gurley in the *African Repository*: the United States might soon be “liberated from her black population.”⁶⁴

When Robert Finley suggested in 1816 that white Americans would be led “by a divine impulse” to support colonization, he also outlined a method of removing free blacks that emphasized the religious import of the project and minimized references to the past and present state of racial discrimination in the United States. Although an emphasis on the African destination of American blacks was the most common strategy for avoiding the difficult topic of American racism, the ability of colonizationists to defer to God’s stewardship of the American slave regime was an important tool for ensuring the integrity of the providential scheme. This submission to divine authority on both the American and African ends of the colonizing effort represented the best attempt by the ACS to attain an impossible but tantalizing goal: to dehistoricize and depoliticize slavery to such an extent that no one could be blamed for its incidence in America. The *Christian Advocate* in 1833 printed a Independence Day address from New York minister Fitch Reed, who pointed out that the need for separation of the races should not be blamed on free blacks: “It is not *their*

⁶⁰ This letter, dated July 24, 1819, was a fund-raising circular written by John Mines and Richard H. Lee of the Loudoun County auxiliary of the ACS. Both Charles Fenton Mercer and James Monroe (who became president of the auxiliary in 1825) hailed from Loudoun County, and the auxiliary was one of the most active in the nation in the 1820s. *National Intelligencer*, October 5, 1819, 2.

⁶¹ Whittlesey, 4.

⁶² Note, for example, Henry Clay’s willingness to speak of the “moral fitness” of turning “a crime into a blessing.” *Tenth Annual Report*, 21.

⁶³ Isaac D. Jones, *An Address, Delivered Before the Somerset County Colonization Society; at their First Annual Meeting, July 4, 1832* (Princess-Anne, Md.: J. S. Zieber, 1832), 15.

⁶⁴ *African Repository* 10, no. 8 (November 1834): 283; and 5, no. 3 (May 1829): 88.

fault – it is the fault of no one. A mysterious Providence has permitted an evil for which the colonization scheme presents the only proper remedy.” Providential language aspired to minimize debate over slavery, obviate blame for prejudice in the United States, and present free black removal as the only avenue open to American benevolence.⁶⁵

3. “The Obvious Designs of Heaven”: Providence and the Politics of Removal

Although the providential rhetoric employed to remove blacks and Native Americans was similar, these debates played out very differently. The Baptist missionary Isaac McCoy appreciated the attention of Washington politicians during the administration of John Quincy Adams, but he soon realized that his ideas about removal were being applied not to those northwestern Indians with whom he had worked, but to the so-called civilized tribes of the Southeast: the Cherokees, Creeks, Chickasaws, and Choctaws, whose insistence on native sovereignty had angered white settlers and politicians in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida. Missionary-lobbyists like McCoy and Jedidiah Morse had previously hailed these southeastern Indians as proof that a civilizing plan could work. But now the patience of white southerners had expired, and the achievements of the Indians became an awkward obstacle to the expansion of white sovereignty. (The discovery of gold in the Cherokee country, and the encouragement that this gave to new waves of white squatters on Cherokee land, hastened the confrontation.) In the last weeks of the Adams administration, Georgia declared its sovereignty over Indian territory, and white settlers seized even more Indian land. When Andrew Jackson was elected to the presidency in November 1828, southern advocates of Indian removal knew that one of their own would soon occupy the White House.⁶⁶

It quickly became clear that Jackson intended to make Indian removal a priority and to disregard the evidence that the southeastern Indians were “civilizing” successfully in their current location. This created an outcry in the North, where newspapers and magazines angrily proclaimed this to be a pivotal moment in American history. “Perhaps no question, since the organization of the general government of the United States, has attracted more attention among the thinking members of our community,” noted one New England magazine soon after Jackson’s inauguration.⁶⁷ The most controversial contribution to this national

⁶⁵ Finley, 1. Reed’s address was delivered in John Street Church, New York City. *Christian Advocate*, July 26, 1833, 189.

⁶⁶ On Jackson’s prioritizing of Indian policy and the debate over the Removal Act, see Wallace, *The Long, Bitter Trail*, 50–72; Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 1: 191–208; and Satz, 9–38.

⁶⁷ “Removal of the Indians,” *North American Review* 31, no. 69 (October 1830): 389–442, at 396.

debate about the future of the Indians was an article by Lewis Cass in the *North American Review* in January 1830. Cass had been governor of the Michigan Territory since 1813 and, like Isaac McCoy, his experience of working with Indians had established him as a leading commentator on Indian affairs. He was also regarded as a mouthpiece for the incoming Jackson administration. (He would become Jackson's secretary of war in 1831.)⁶⁸ For Cass, the debate over removal had been marred by the romanticism of the Indians' white supporters. There was nothing innately laudable or worthwhile about the "savage" state, and removal's opponents had set themselves against "the progress of civilization and improvement." (Cass argued that only a few of the Cherokees were actually civilized, and that this highly visible minority was composed of unrepresentative "half-breeds.") White Americans should recall their heritage and their providential status: God had planted white settlers "upon the skirts of a boundless forest" and had ordered them to subdue the continent. They had done so successfully, and now the Indians had to make way for the completion of the divine mandate. One side had been "elevated" by this process, the other "depressed," but this merely reflected the "obvious designs of Providence" with which neither side should interfere. The Indians were "steadily and rapidly diminishing" and might find salvation only in the most radical removal plans; otherwise their "utter extinction" was imminent. God would adjudicate the fate of western Indians at a later point; in the meantime, it would be foolish to oppose the process by which providence had "reclaimed" the American continent.⁶⁹

Cass's perspective on the removal debate had the virtue of historical consistency. He argued that two centuries of white-Indian contact had clearly marked out the supremacy of white society and that the expansion of white American settlements had obviously enjoyed the support of God. However, his suggestion that Indians were "diminishing" according to a providential plan presented problems to a canny advocate of removal. On the one hand, Cass's rhetoric was vulnerable to refutation by the many clergymen who had taken up the cause of the Cherokees, who might more authoritatively determine the course of providence than a territorial governor. On the other hand, Cass's bleak assessment of Indian prospects undercut the glorious western future that McCoy's colonization plans had promised the Indians. While Cass was hardly the only person to argue that God intended whites to supplant Indians in the settlement of North America, this argument became surprisingly muted in the critical debates over removal during the 1830s. Faced with the delicate political problem of making

⁶⁸ The most recent biography of Cass is Willard Carl Klunder, *Lewis Cass and the Politics of Moderation* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1996); see 17–95 for Cass's role in formulating federal Indian policy between 1813 and 1836. See also Bernard Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 225–26; Dippie, 61–62; and Wallace, *The Long, Bitter Trail*, 41–48.

⁶⁹ [Lewis Cass], "Removal of the Indians," *North American Review* 30, no. 66 (January 1830): 62–121, at 64, 71, 107, 75, 112, 54.

the expulsion of the eastern Indians seem benevolent, the proponents of removal mostly avoided providentialism in their appeals for public support.

Isaac McCoy, for example, stressed that the speed of white expansion had overwhelmed the southeastern Indians and that his earlier assessments – that the Cherokees could happily develop in their eastern territories – had been overtaken by events.⁷⁰ But McCoy now avoided the explicit claim that the new proposals for “colonization” enjoyed providential favor. Southern newspapers and politicians followed his lead, lamenting (as in the debate over African colonization) the “degradation” of Indians, forced to interact with white frontiersmen, and extolling the possibilities of an Indian enclave in the West.⁷¹ Perhaps the most notorious example of this rhetoric came from Jackson himself, who declared in his annual message of 1829 that Indian removal was no different from white migration to the West, save for the fact that the Indians enjoyed financial assistance from the federal government. Jackson’s concluding flourish seems particularly tactless: “How many thousands of our own people would gladly embrace the opportunity of removing to the West on such conditions!” This rhetoric created more problems than it solved, and Jackson’s insouciance helped to galvanize the opposition to removal.⁷²

Given the refusal of the southeastern Indians to endorse the idea of removal as progressive or providentially beneficial, Jackson and his supporters struggled to convince white Americans that the indigenous nations of the Southeast were willing participants in a broader process of western expansion. Some southerners therefore reverted to the simpler idea that Indians were the victims of this process; they cited “the laws of Providence” to insist that, in spite of the evidence, the southeastern Indians were essentially the same nomadic hunters that white Americans had supplanted since 1607. The Indians, according to Jackson’s first secretary of war, John Eaton, could not escape their biological destiny: “An Almighty hand has stamped upon every creature a particular genius, propensity and leading traits of character.”⁷³ This argument encouraged southerners to dismiss the apparent progress of the southeastern Indians as the work of a few “half-breeds” who had wrested control of these nations. These

⁷⁰ On McCoy’s support for Jackson during the removal debates, see Schultz, 123–40; and Lyons, 31–35.

⁷¹ For examples, see the article in the *Georgia Constitutionalist*, April 26, 1830, 3; and the speeches of John Tipton of Georgia, *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 25th Cong., 2nd sess. (Senate), April 18, 1838, 273; and Charles Haynes (also of Georgia), *ibid.*, May 29, 1838, 370.

⁷² Andrew Jackson, “Second Annual Message,” in Richardson, ed., 2: 521. A series of attacks on Jackson’s insensitive comments was reprinted in the *Cherokee Phoenix*, the newspaper established and maintained by the leadership in the Cherokee capital, New Echota. The *New York Spectator* described Jackson’s attempted analogy between “the forced departure of the Indians” and the “free-willed, voluntary emigration of our New England youth” as an “insult to our understanding.” *Cherokee Phoenix*, January 15, 1831, 2.

⁷³ John Eaton to Hugh Montgomery, July 29, 1830, reprinted in *Niles Weekly Register*, November 13, 1830, 200. Elsewhere in the letter, Eaton declared the prospect of civilizing Indians as a “Utopian thought.” For another example of this rhetoric, see the editorial of the *Richmond Enquirer*, November 21, 1829, 4.

leaders could not save the Indians; they would merely postpone the inevitable destruction of an inferior race by a superior one.⁷⁴ But the idea of God as the author of the Indians' demise was politically risky, and removal advocates looked for a more emollient argument with which to counter the northern clergymen and philanthropists who rushed to the Indians' defense in 1830.

The solution was to replace overt providential arguments with a softer form of determinism. Instead of presenting Indians as willfully defiant of God, southerners and removal advocates suggested that the demise of the Indians was a natural rather than a judicial process. According to Thomas McKenney, the head of the Office of Indian Affairs, Indians were "as certainly doomed to destruction as the summer leaf is to fall under the perishing effects of the winter's frost." Others rushed to complete the metaphor: the Georgia representative John Tipton expressed his regret that Native Americans had "melted away before the approaching whites like snow beneath the beams of the sun." There was little triumphalism even in the rhetoric of those who brought God directly into the process. One Philadelphia magazine noted in 1830 that the separation of Indians from whites had been "decreed by Providence" but that the reasons for this were "inscrutable." Georgia congressman William Dawson told the House of Representatives that God intended removal but that Americans could only wonder at "the *mystery* of the ways of Providence" as they moved into the lands vacated by the Cherokees. This wistful rhetoric could seem almost nostalgic for the Indians' martial past. Indian removal and decline was an inevitable, "natural" consequence of the encounter between whites and indigenous peoples, but this did not mean that whites should be as unsympathetic and unfeeling as Lewis Cass had appeared in the *North American Review*. In this way, a softly deterministic thinking, with its metaphors of falling leaves or melting snow, came to replace providentialism as the lingua franca of removal.⁷⁵

Between the election of Jackson in November 1829 and the publication of Lewis Cass's article in January 1830, a formidable coalition developed in opposition to the removal plans. Christian reformers from the Northeast were particularly committed opponents of removal, but they were augmented by Whig politicians who saw an early opportunity to lambaste Jackson as brutish and immoral.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ This argument proved especially popular with southern congressmen. See, for instance, the speeches in the House debate on removal by Richard H. Wilde, *Register of Debates*, 21st Cong., 1st sess. (House), May 19, 1830, 1082; and Henry G. Lamar, *ibid.*, 1120.

⁷⁵ Thomas McKenney to H. Lincoln (September 28, 1829), reprinted in *Richmond Enquirer*, October 13, 1829, 2; John Tipton, *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 25th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), April 18, 1838, 269; "Tanner's Indian Narrative," *American Quarterly Review* 8, no. 15 (September 1830): 108–34, at 109; and William Dawson, *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 25th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), May 24, 1838, 482.

⁷⁶ For accounts of the constituency and arguments of removal opponents, see Mary Hersberger, "Mobilizing Women, Anticipating Abolition: The Struggle against Indian Removal in the 1830s," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (1999): 15–40; Wallace, *The Long, Bitter Trail*, 66–69; and Dippie, 65–67.

Even as southern removal advocates steered away from explicitly religious language, this northern coalition embraced the idea that God had vouchsafed the Indians' future in their current location. Jeremiah Evarts, the corresponding secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, produced a popular series of essays in 1829 that outlined the solid legal foundations for Indian persistence in the Southeast. Writing under the pseudonym of William Penn, the Presbyterian minister insisted that the sheer weight of legal precedent on the side of the Indians' claims reflected a "singular arrangement of Providence" in their favor. Transposing the entire political struggle into a broader register, Evarts even argued that the Cherokee debate had been designed by God to demonstrate to the world "the very strongest conceivable exhibition of the obligation of treaties."⁷⁷ Senator Theodore Frelinghuysen, an enthusiastic advocate of black colonization but a fervent opponent of Indian removal, also insisted on the providential purpose of the Indians. In a Senate debate on removal in January 1830, he insisted that God wanted Americans to share the "common bounties of a benignant Providence" with the indigenous population. The Indians had, after all, been "planted" by God in America "before Great Britain herself had a political existence."⁷⁸

Boston newspaper editor Nathaniel Parker Willis made a similar argument, attacking Lewis Cass for his providential presumptuousness and declaring that God had "reserved this solitary tribe of the forest" to demonstrate that any people – no matter how apparently barbarous – could be educated and Christianized.⁷⁹ Willis told his readers that the debate over the fate of the Indians in 1830 was the most grave crisis that America had faced in the two centuries since the arrival of the *Mayflower*. But those northerners who took a stand against removal faced an awkward dilemma in placing the 1830 debate in historical context. Was there any evidence that whites had exercised a benevolent effect upon Indians since 1620 and that God had specifically preserved Native Americans for some providential purpose? Were northerners obliged to indict their forefathers for the numerous Indian wars and expulsions of the colonial period? These concerns crept into the discussion about the southeastern Indians and threatened to lay a historical trap for the opponents of removal.

Take the example of Joseph Story, an associate justice of the Supreme Court since 1811, who joined Chief Justice John Marshall in 1832 in ruling against Georgia's right to impose its laws on the Cherokees living within the state. Jackson refused to uphold this ruling, but Story was satisfied that he had done

⁷⁷ On Evarts, see John A. Andrew III, *From Revivals to Removal: Jeremiah Evarts, the Cherokee Nation and the Search for the Soul of America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992); and Francis Paul Prucha, introduction to Prucha, ed., *Cherokee Removal: The "William Penn" Essays and Other Writings* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 3–40. Evarts's essays were widely reprinted in northern newspapers and magazines and, when published in book form in early 1830, became a best seller. Jeremiah Evarts, *Essays on the Present Crisis in the Condition of the American Indians* (Philadelphia: Thomas Kite, 1830), 44, 46.

⁷⁸ Theodore Frelinghuysen, *Register of Debates*, 21st Cong., 1st sess. (Senate), April 9, 1830, 311.

⁷⁹ *American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 10 (January 1830): 701–18, at 710–11, 707.

everything he could to defend the southeastern Indians and to insist upon their right to remain on their land.⁸⁰ Four years earlier, though, he had offered a very different view of the Indians and their place in America. In an 1828 address on the bicentennial of the founding of Salem in Massachusetts, Story presented a sweeping vision of historical providentialism. God had brought America from humble beginnings to its current eminence, and even a careful orator could detect “brilliant prospects” if the nation remained on its historical trajectory. But what of the Indians, whose fortunes had declined in proportion to the success of the European migrants? Story rejected any suggestion that New Englanders had mistreated Native Americans or that white settlers had played a role in the demise of America’s indigenous population. But while the Puritans “constantly respected” Indians, the gradual diminution of Native Americans was undeniable and could be attributed only to a mysterious historical force. “Every where at the approach of the white man they fade away,” noted Story, in terms that would soon be adopted by removal’s proponents. “We hear the rustling of their footsteps, like that of the withered leaves of autumn, and they are gone for ever.”⁸¹

In describing the “law of their nature” that had overwhelmed the Indians, Story blurred the question of God’s involvement in the “melancholy” history of Native America. Why had the Indians declined over the past two centuries? Did God simply side with the strong against the weak?

It may be so; perhaps, in the wisdom of Providence, it must be so. I pretend not to comprehend, or solve, such weighty difficulties. But neither philosophy nor policy can shut out the feelings of nature. Humanity must continue to sigh at the constant sacrifices of this bold, but wasting race. And Religion, if she may not blush at the deed, must, as she sees the successive victims depart, cling to the altar with a drooping heart, and mourn over a destiny without hope and without example.

The tenets of Story’s argument were simple: New Englanders were blameless in their treatment of the Indians; Native Americans had declined rapidly from their first encounter with whites and were “destined to a slow, but sure extinction”; and the “wisdom of Providence” that had determined this process was inscrutable. In spite of his stand against Georgia in 1832, in this earlier address Story had rehearsed the arguments that were dolorously employed by the proponents of removal in 1830.⁸²

⁸⁰ On Story, see R. Kent Newmyer, *Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story: Statesman of the Old Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985). For a summary of the *Worcester* case and the involvement of Story and Marshall in the decision, see Newmyer, *John Marshall and the Heroic Age of the Supreme Court* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 440–58.

⁸¹ Joseph Story, *A Discourse Pronounced at the Request of the Essex Historical Society, on the 18th of September, 1828, in Commemoration of the First Settlement of Salem* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, Little and Wilkins, 1828), 86, 73, 74–75.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 74, 77–78.

Story's boss, John Marshall, was more hardheaded about American history. After reading the printed edition of his colleague's 1828 oration, Marshall sent Story a mild rebuke. It was absurdly romantic, suggested Marshall, to credit Native Americans with natural rights to the land and to suggest that Europeans had always respected these rights. In fact, the Indians were a "fierce and dangerous enemy" whose "cruel system of warfare seemed to justify every endeavour to remove them to a distance from civilized settlements." Of course, Euro-Americans had killed and expelled the Indians: this was a contest for land and survival in which one side had to lose. While Marshall was now an advocate of Indian rights, and was filled with "indignation" at the "disreputable conduct" of Georgia toward the Creeks and the Cherokees, this benevolence depended upon the weakness and even the dependence of the remaining Native Americans. Now that the battle for the continent had been won, the people of the United States might "give full indulgence to the principles of humanity and justice" that circumstance had previously forced them to disregard.⁸³

If the history of New England complicated the efforts of northerners to present Indian development and Christianization as a providential process, many removal opponents looked to circumvent the details of God's plan and simply to revert to judicial providentialism: the expulsion of Native Americans was unjust, and God would punish the United States if Andrew Jackson succeeded in his plans. In his rebuke of Lewis Cass, Nathaniel Parker Willis of Boston insisted that God would pour out his wrath upon the proponents of removal and those who allowed them to succeed through inaction. Northerners who deferred to events would be assailed as surely as those southern congressmen who had drawn up removal legislation in Congress: "We are not permitted to sit still in the blindness of fatuity, awaiting the determination of Jehovah, and exclaiming, in the supine idleness and hypocritical resignation of the Turk, 'God is good! His will be done!'" Instead, Willis prophesied that the "vengeance of Heaven" would overwhelm the nation if the southeastern Indians were expelled.⁸⁴

This warning – that judicial providentialism would bring the United States to account for its treatment of nonwhites – became a commonplace among abolitionists after 1830, and it was also one of the more radical northern arguments against Indian removal. As early as 1829, Jeremiah Evarts promised his readers that the "curses of Almighty God" were poised to strike the nation; William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* suggested in 1832 that God had stripped Spain of its American colonies because of its long history of Indian cruelty and warned that the United States could suffer a similar fate. For some Americans, at least, this anxiety was a cause of acute personal discomfort. As it became

⁸³ John Marshall to Joseph Story, October 29, 1828, in Charles F. Hobson, ed., *Papers of John Marshall*, vol. 11 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 178. For an account of this letter, see Newmyer, *John Marshall*, 441–42.

⁸⁴ *American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 10 (January 1830): 701–18, at 715.

apparent in 1832 that Jackson had no interest in upholding Supreme Court decisions in favor of the Cherokees, Joseph Story warned his wife to expect the worst: "I fear, and greatly fear, that in the course of Providence, there will be dealt to us a heavy retributive justice." One Boston removal opponent even asked Congress in 1838 to revoke his citizenship, hoping that "no portion of the hoarded vengeance of Heaven for the unparalleled wrongs and cruelties of this government might fall upon his head." This language effectively circumvented the murky history of Indian-white relations, and insisted that America's duty to native peoples in the present was clear and unavoidable.⁸⁵

But the sight of politicians and editors promising divine vengeance merely invited southern politicians to pose an obvious question: where was this providentialism of wrath in America's early history? A number of prominent removal opponents were openly mocked by Georgians and Alabamans for their doom-saying. After Henry Clay of Kentucky (a rare southern opponent of removal) had warned the Senate in 1835 of the providential consequences of implementing removal, Albert Cuthbert of Georgia wondered why God had spared the whites of New England in previous centuries: "If these Cherokees were to appear at that day of judgment to urge their wrongs against Georgia, where were the hosts of shades of all the original red men on this side of the Mississippi? Upon whom were they to seek revenge?"⁸⁶ The most uncomfortable rebukes were leveled at John Quincy Adams, who returned to Washington as a congressional representative in 1831, and immediately took up the cause of the remaining southeastern Indians. Adams was eventually taken to task by Charles E. Haynes of Georgia, who read from an 1802 speech by "a distinguished citizen of Massachusetts" marking out the upward trajectory of American history and denying the right of the Indians to "monopolize the liberal bounties of Providence." The author was Adams himself, and the former president settled in his seat without responding to Haynes's barb. (This trick was so successful that the Georgian performed an encore in the House chamber two years later.) Adams eventually found it easier to apply the providentialism of wrath to the debate over slavery; in the case of Indian removal, his own past and the history of

⁸⁵ Evarts, 101; *Liberator*, February 25, 1832, 32; William Wetmore Story, ed., *Life and Letters of Joseph Story*, 2 vols. (London: John Chapman, 1851), 2: 79. The *Boston Atlas* recalled the man's effort to give up his citizenship after a memorial to the House of Representatives against Cherokee removal was rejected: "Let no one impugn the justice of Heaven, should the spoiler yet be spoiled, and the trampler trampled." The article was reprinted (with critical commentary) in the *Georgia Constitutionalist*, April 12, 1838, 2.

⁸⁶ Albert Cuthbert, *Register of Debates*, 23rd Cong., 2nd sess. (Senate), February 4, 1835, 301. The same rebuttal was used repeatedly by southern congressmen during the 1830s. See, for instance, John Forsyth, *Register of Debates*, 21st Cong., 1st sess. (Senate), April 15, 1830, 333; and William C. Dawson, *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 25th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), February 4, 1835, 481. These Congressional retorts were accompanied by similar sentiments in the southern press. See, for example, *Georgia Constitutionalist*, January 15, 1830, 3; and January 29, 1830, 3.

New England confounded his efforts to make providence serve the cause of the Indians.⁸⁷

Even those people most directly affected by the debate – the Native Americans of the Southeast – struggled to mobilize providential arguments against Jackson's plans. The concept of divine punishment and reward had deep roots in indigenous religious belief and had been harnessed by Indian prophets and leaders in the Great Lakes region during the pan-Indian movement before the War of 1812.⁸⁸ William Apress, the Massachusetts Indian who achieved celebrity as a Christian minister and lecturer in the 1820s and 1830s, insisted that God intended all Indians to be converted and civilized. (Apress also spoke strongly against the "deep rooted popular opinion" that God had made the Indians "on purpose for destruction, to be driven out by white Christians.")⁸⁹ But the southeastern Indians, in their numerous messages and memorials to Congress and the white public, could find little inspiration in a providential understanding of their fate. A delegation of Choctaws wondered sadly in 1825 why God had permitted whites to expand so prodigiously since the seventeenth century, while he had "permitted us to melt before you." Perhaps the Indians would yet "be made to become like white men," but God had apparently kept the "great end" of Indian decline to himself.⁹⁰ The leaders of the southeastern Indian nations, partly in conjunction with white organizers of removal opposition, tended to avoid the providentialism of wrath entirely. Just as John Marshall had told Joseph Story that the Indians deserved sympathy because of their harmlessness, so Indian leaders like John Ross crafted a providential stoicism that placed the Cherokees and the other southeastern Indians at the mercy of God, as well as Andrew Jackson.⁹¹

⁸⁷ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 24th Cong., 1st sess. (House), June 29, 1836, 475; and 25th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), May 28, 1838, 366. This inventive recalling of Adams's earlier rhetoric on Native Americans was complemented by charges that, as recently as 1825 (in his inaugural address), Adams had favored a policy of Indian removal indistinguishable from that of his successor, Andrew Jackson. See, for example, the anonymous letter to the *Richmond Enquirer*, June 4, 1830, 3.

⁸⁸ William McLoughlin, "The Cherokee Ghost Dance Movement, 1811–1813," in McLoughlin et al., eds., *The Cherokee Ghost Dance: Essays on the Southeastern Indians, 1789–1861* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1984), 111–51.

⁸⁹ William Apress, *Eulogy on King Philip, As Pronounced at the Odeon, in Federal Street, Boston* (Boston: Published by the Author, 1836), 21. Apress quoted from a Rev. Nahum Gold who had supposedly told his western Illinois congregation in June 1835 that God intended to drive out the "Red Canaanites" and replace them with productive white settlers, thus ensuring that "the desert becomes an Eden." See also Apress, *A Son of the Forest, the Experience of William Apress, a Native of the Forest* (New York: Published by the Author, 1829); and Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 238–51.

⁹⁰ "Address from the Choctaw Delegation of Indians in Washington" (February 21, 1825), *Congressional Serial* 110, Senate Document 35 (18th Cong., 2nd sess., vol. 3), 5–6.

⁹¹ See, for instance, *Cherokee Phoenix*, April 16, 1831, 3; and John Ross, "Message to the Cherokees" (October 1835), *Congressional Serial* 411, House Report 1098 (27th Cong., 2nd sess., vol. 2), 44. For examples of an emphasis among southeastern Indians on the success of their

Providential language thus played a less prominent role during the removal debates of the 1830s than one might expect, given the history of white-Indian relations and the religious rationales for removal that had been developed in the 1820s by Jedidiah Morse and Isaac McCoy. The more subtle determinism of Indian decline proved popular with removal proponents and challenged those who would defend the Indians by fixing them within the order of nature rather than a scheme of human or sacred history. Northern reformers, Whig politicians, and native leaders faced a slippery confluence of arguments that largely avoided the clumsy assertion that Indians were Canaanites and would be punished by God for their sins. White Americans could hardly view the melting snow of spring or the falling leaves of autumn as a form of divine retribution meted out to the recalcitrant elements of God's creation. These were natural processes, which hardly committed the human observer to decry the seasons or to view creation through a lens of punishment and reward. Thus the southeastern Indians (and their white defenders) spent a good deal of time in the 1830s simply arguing for the humanity of indigenous peoples and trying desperately to prevent removal's proponents (and even some of their allies) from concluding that Native Americans were doomed.

The case of African colonization was different. Supporters of colonization had enough confidence in their rationale for black removal that they circulated providential arguments among free blacks themselves, and many white members of the ACS seemed genuinely perplexed at the unpopularity of the Liberian scheme within the free black community. (Inventive advocates of colonization even declared that free blacks' wariness was providential: God had "retarded" black enthusiasm to prevent the fledgling African colony from being overwhelmed by American volunteers.) White supporters of the ACS were not entirely delusional in believing that colonization would appeal to African Americans. As early as the 1780s, free blacks in Newport and Boston had agitated for an overseas colony that might provide them with an escape from discrimination within the United States. In the years before the War of 1812, the Massachusetts sea captain Paul Cuffe promoted the idea of a colony in the black communities on the eastern seaboard, inspired partly by the establishment of the British colony of Sierra Leone in 1787. Even in the early 1820s, as free black leaders dismissed the white-governed colony of Liberia, they promoted emigration to Haiti, whose leader Paul Boyer courted African American settlers.⁹² Immediately after the

"civilizing" efforts and their entitlement to the support and encouragement of the federal government, see "Memorial of the Cherokee Indians" (November 5, 1829), *Congressional Serial* 201, House Report 311 (21st Cong., 1st sess., vol. 3), 5; "Memorial of the Cherokee Nation" (September 28, 1836), *ibid.*, 13; and "Memorial of the Cherokee Nation" (February 22, 1837), *Congressional Serial* 325, House Document 99 (25th Cong., 2nd sess., vol. 5), 4.

⁹² Floyd J. Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Emigration and Colonization, 1787–1863* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 3–6, 8–11, 21–53; Lamont D. Thomas, *Rise to be a People: A Biography of Paul Cuffe* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 93–119. On Haiti's appeal, see Chris Dixon, *African America and Haiti: Emigration and Black*

founding of the ACS, Robert Finley and other society officials tried to recruit Philadelphia free black leaders Richard Allen and James Forten to the colonization cause. These overtures were eventually rejected by northern blacks at large. When James Forten later recalled a public meeting to discuss the ACS plans in Philadelphia in 1817, he noted that the black community's vocal rejection of the scheme "seemed as if it would tear down the walls of the building."⁹³

In opposing African colonization, some free blacks were inclined to dwell upon the providential promise of black persistence in the United States. In an 1825 address celebrating the belated French recognition of Haitian independence, William Watkins, a teacher and political agitator from Baltimore, presented Haiti not as an escape route for black Americans but as evidence that racial equality was a providential imperative. "The descendants of Africa never were designated by their Creator to sustain an inferiority, or even a mediocrity, in the chain of beings," Watkins assured his audience. While Haiti's renaissance seemed to fulfill the biblical prophecy that "Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hand," the progress of free blacks within the United States might also advance God's redemptive scheme in history. Watkins maintained his belief that the "real evils" that had affected blacks in America would eventually be overruled by God and that they would be shown "through Divine Providence" to "work together for our good."⁹⁴

Watkins continued to agitate for black persistence in the pages of the antislavery press and, from 1827, in the first free black newspaper in the United States,

Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century (Westwood, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000), 15–61; and Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 81–104.

⁹³ Isaac Brown's biography of Finley, published in 1819, states clearly that both Richard Allen and James Forten "spoke warmly" of colonization and were "animated" by the subject in their meetings with Finley in early 1817; Isaac V. Brown, *Memoirs of the Rev. Robert Finley, D.D.* (New Brunswick: Terhune & Letson, 1819), 99–102. But an 1835 letter from Forten (reprinted in the *Liberator*, August 1, 1835, 121) maintained that no free black gave the ACS proposal serious consideration. The fullest account of the open meeting of free blacks in Philadelphia, held in Bethel Church on January 15, 1817, is given by Gary Nash. He argues that Allen, Forten, and Absalom Jones all spoke in favor of colonization but were rebuked by the vast majority of free blacks in attendance at the meeting, who dismissed the idea. Although Nash suggests that this event was "an extraordinarily annealing event in the black community," he notes that Forten and Allen, among others, were still open to the idea of colonization when they met with Robert Finley a few days after the mass meeting. Nash, 237–39. See also Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787–1848* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 35, 47. Winch argues that Forten reported on the Bethel Church meeting to Paul Cuffe, but hoped amid the strong rejection that free blacks might yet be persuaded to accept a colonization scheme. Nash and Winch both refer to the "spirit of 1817," a rhetorical process whereby free blacks (and especially free black leaders) tended to exaggerate the extent of their own reaction against colonization from the earliest days of the ACS as they looked back on the 1810s and 1820s from the changed circumstances of the 1830s.

⁹⁴ Watkins's address, delivered on August 17, 1825, was reprinted in *Genius of Universal Emancipation* 4, no. 11 (August 1825): 169–70.

Freedom's Journal of New York. In one of its early issues, the paper's founding editor, Samuel Cornish, assured readers that God could not have allowed slavery to take hold in America without also devising a plan for its extirpation; and that this plan was slowly moving toward completion.⁹⁵ But Cornish's successor as editor of the *Journal*, John Russwurm, soon began to run articles that effectively endorsed the providential argument for black removal: Liberia was the "promised land," God had intended a black colony to redeem the continent, and the Liberian settlers were simply reenacting the providential narrative first worked out at Plymouth and Jamestown.⁹⁶ Cornish (and the angry readers of the newspaper) forced Russwurm's resignation and, while Russwurm headed to Liberia to work for the ACS, the founding editor returned to his post with an uncompromising message: the United States could never "repay" its debt to Africa through black removal. Instead, "the shortest way to accomplish this grand object is, to do her sons justice wherever we find them." Under Cornish's restored leadership, the newspaper changed its name – to *The Rights of All* – and printed no more articles in support of colonization.⁹⁷

While many white opponents of slavery were seduced by the ACS, free blacks moved quickly to discredit the providential arguments of the Colonization Society. They also offered their own understanding of God's purpose that might shake white philanthropists from their romantic attachment to Liberia. In 1828 William Watkins wondered how blacks might be "the most vicious" people in America and yet also the "instruments to evangelize and civilize Africa."⁹⁸ In the early 1830s, a series of pioneering free black conventions in northern states issued numerous statements that placed the Declaration of Independence above the providential rescue offered by the ACS. This rhetoric was by turns astute and impassioned. The free blacks who gathered for the Philadelphia convention in 1835 proposed black rights as the prerequisite for the accomplishment of America's world mission: "If America is to be instrumental through the providence of Almighty God in blessing other portions of the peopled earth," their concluding statement read, "how necessary is it that she should first purify her

⁹⁵ "People of Colour," *Freedom's Journal*, April 6, 1827, 13.

⁹⁶ *Freedom's Journal*, March 7, 1829, 386. On the relationship between Russwurm and Cornish, and the founding of *Freedom's Journal*, see Miller, 82–90. See also Martin E. Dann, *The Black Press, 1827–1890: The Quest for National Identity* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1971), 16–17. Russwurm's change of views was cheered by the ACS. The *African Repository* printed a lengthy extract from his March 7 editorial, under the heading "Candid Acknowledgment of Error." *African Repository* 5, no. 12 (February 1829): 376. Russwurm was in negotiation with Ralph Gurley over a position in the colonial bureaucracy in Liberia, and his eventual emigration was paid for by the society. Miller, 87–88.

⁹⁷ For Cornish's views on colonization after resuming control of the paper, see *Rights of All*, May 29, 1829, 2; and June 12, 1829, 10. Rumors that Russwurm had been a paid employee of the ACS during his editorial tenure at the *Journal* persisted in the free black community. In 1831 a Philadelphia free black wrote in the *Liberator* that Russwurm had "subverted the pledge he made to his colored brethren" and that his advocacy of colonization had been effected by "the tempter MONEY." *Liberator*, April 16, 1831, 62.

⁹⁸ *Freedom's Journal*, July 18, 1828, 129.

own dominions?"⁹⁹ At the 1834 convention in New York, delegates issued a raw and immediate message: blacks should remain in the United States and "multiply in numbers" even if slavery and prejudice intensified, so that "our visages may be as so many Bibles, that shall warn this guilty nation of her injustice and cruelty to the descendants of Africa."¹⁰⁰ Although free blacks like Watkins and the convention delegates of the early 1830s saw historical providentialism as a lever that might be used for as well as against black persistence, it was a judicial understanding of God's will – the providentialism of wrath – which came to dominate the free black and white abolitionist response to racial injustice after 1830.

The chief promoter of this wrathful message was William Lloyd Garrison, who began writing for a Baltimore antislavery newspaper in the 1820s but who retained a grudging tolerance for the ACS until at least 1829. (In fact, he delivered a Fourth of July address that year at a society event, during which a collection was taken for the colonization cause.)¹⁰¹ After traveling to free black communities and discussing the topic directly with African Americans, Garrison eventually concluded that the society was more of an obstacle than a spur to the abolition of slavery.¹⁰² His path away from the ACS was also paved by the society itself. Just two months after that independence oration in July 1829, the ACS secretary Ralph Gurley was compelled by his southern supporters to issue an embarrassing clarification in the pages of the *African Repository*: the society had no intention of promoting "general emancipation," he reassured slaveholders, and "has no disposition to interfere with the rights of private property."¹⁰³ This was the breaking point for Garrison, who began to write and lecture against the society for black and white audiences across the North. By 1832 he had gathered his arguments – and a substantial compendium of free black speeches – into the two volumes of his *Thoughts on African Colonization*, which created a sensation both within and beyond New England.¹⁰⁴ In tandem with the newly founded *Liberator*, Garrison and his free black collaborators seriously compromised the reputation of the Colonization Society across the

⁹⁹ *Minutes of the Fifth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour in the United States* (Philadelphia: William P. Gibbons, 1835), 27.

¹⁰⁰ *Minutes of the Fourth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour, in the United States* (New York: Published by Order of the Convention, 1834), 31. This quotation is taken from the "Declaration of Sentiment," adopted by the Convention on June 12, 1834.

¹⁰¹ "Fourth of July," *Genius of Universal Emancipation* 1 (3rd ser.), no. 4 (July 1830): 49. *Liberator*, January 1, 1831, 1. For Garrison's regret over his appearance at the ACS fund-raising event, see also his *Thoughts on African Colonization*; or, *An Impartial Exhibition of the Doctrines, Principles and Purposes of the American Colonization Society together with the Resolutions, Addresses and Remonstrances of the Free People of Color*, 2 vols. (Boston: Garrison and Knapp, 1832), 1: 3–4. Garrison erroneously states here that he gave his address on July 4, 1828, rather than 1829.

¹⁰² For a general account of the departure of Garrison and abolitionists from the ranks of the ACS, see Staudenraus, 188–206; and John L. Thomas, *The Liberator: William Lloyd Garrison, a Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), 91–104, 114–54.

¹⁰³ "Error Corrected," *African Repository* 5, no. 7 (September 1829): 215–16.

¹⁰⁴ On the effects of Garrison's *Thoughts*, see Staudenraus, 200–6.

northern states. There was a good deal of satire in Garrison's approach – as in his suggestion that ACS vice-president and New Jersey senator Theodore Frelinghuysen be sent “back” to Holland – but his most striking arguments involved the promise that God would punish and perhaps even destroy the United States for its stubborn refusal to treat blacks equally.¹⁰⁵

For Garrison, the ACS could only produce a “deep sense of guilt” and an “awful dread of retribution” in attentive Americans. He could find “no evidence of contrition” for slavery in the effort to remove free blacks and warned that this effort “to outwit the vengeance of heaven” would fail utterly. “Your only alternative,” he warned his readers in 1832, “is either to redress the wrongs of the oppressed *now*, and humble yourselves before God, or prepare for the chastisements of Heaven. I repeat it – REPENTANCE OR PUNISHMENT must be yours.”¹⁰⁶ Contributors to the *Liberator* produced the Haitian Revolution or the Nat Turner uprising to clinch this point: slavery could not endure without bringing serious judgments from God, and those judgments would only be hastened by the insincere and evasive actions of the Colonization Society. “The fire of God’s indignation is kindling against us,” Garrison observed, “but we are obstinate in our transgression.” Americans should realize that their expectations of national prosperity and the extension of the nation’s upward trajectory were entirely misplaced: the American future was “gloominess in the extreme,” illuminated not by the national meridian but by “vivid flashes of God’s vengeance.”¹⁰⁷

During the short tenure of John Russwurm as editor of *Freedom’s Journal*, one particularly galling article about Liberia’s promise prompted a black correspondent to accuse the Colonization Society of “deifying prejudice.”¹⁰⁸ This phrase neatly captured the racist origins of the colonization proposals and the inventive efforts of ACS supporters to plot the history of American slavery toward the salvation of Africa. Free blacks and white abolitionists responded to this laundering of colonization not by rejecting God’s role in history but by proposing a particularly abrasive form of judicial providentialism to supplant the historical version that had been adopted by Robert Finley and his followers. In the case of Indian removal, both Native Americans and their white supporters were confounded by the subtle determinisms adopted by removal’s proponents in the Southeast and in Washington. But the free blacks and whites who challenged the Colonization Society were better able to sustain a wrathful version of providentialism that promised a bleak future for the United States.

Conclusion: “Judgments Are Yet to Be Visited upon Us”

For a brief moment in 1832, it seemed as if an Indian uprising in the old Northwest might vindicate the doom-laden predictions of some removal opponents.

¹⁰⁵ Garrison, *Thoughts*, 1: 120.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 1: 102–3, 142, 104.

¹⁰⁷ *Liberator*, December 17, 1831, 201; and October 27, 1832, 169–70; Garrison, *Thoughts*, 1: 20, 169–170.

¹⁰⁸ *Freedom’s Journal*, October 5, 1827, 118.

The U.S. war with Black Hawk and the Sac and Fox Indians drew thousands of American troops and militiamen into Illinois and Wisconsin, including Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis. This war did not end well for Native Americans: Black Hawk was quickly subdued and the advance of white settlement was scarcely interrupted.¹⁰⁹ The brief public hysteria over Black Hawk's challenge was replaced by widespread fascination about his character and even his romantic entanglements. In the fall of 1832, scarcely a month after Black Hawk's surrender, one Illinois paper begged James Fenimore Cooper or James Hall to produce a "high wrought novel" about the chief that might satisfy the public's thirst for Indian melodrama.¹¹⁰ Another Indian leader who was poised to become a providential scourge had instead become an excuse for sentimentalism and nostalgia about the passing of the Indians. While the real Black Hawk was greeting curious crowds in eastern cities and compiling his autobiography, a disappointed New York writer composed a poem in which a fictional version of the vanquished chief threatened vengeance upon the United States. The poem also captured Black Hawk and his tribe in a familiar pose: "Like the snow-wreath in the new sun of May / Down-trodden, soiled, and melting fast away."¹¹¹

The idea that America might be punished for its cruelties toward the Indians was only occasionally reprised in the decades before the Civil War. Perhaps the most notable reiteration of this theme came in January 1861, during a fast-day sermon by Henry Ward Beecher in Brooklyn. Beecher warned his audience that, although Americans might have forgotten the removal debates and the expulsion of the Indians, God had not: "Either moral government over nations is apocryphal, or judgments are yet to be visited upon us for the wrongs done to the Indian." Even here, the idea that removal had angered God was a prelude to Beecher's main quarry: the role of slavery in bringing the nation to the point of dissolution. Beecher's initial willingness to discuss injustice toward the Indians was, in any case, unusual in a rhetorical landscape that was overwhelmingly focused after 1830 on the providential meaning of slavery rather than divine displeasure at the fate of Native Americans.¹¹²

Isaac McCoy was intensely frustrated by the collapse of public interest in the Indians' providential status after 1830. McCoy had made good on his promises by resuming his missions among the removed nations in the late 1830s, and he was a first-hand witness to the fact that, for the Native Americans of the Southeast, life went on in the West. The Cherokees, who had endured the Trail

¹⁰⁹ Roger L. Nichols, *Black Hawk and the Warrior's Path* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1992). The causes of the war are discussed in Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Prelude to Disaster: The Course of Indian-White Relations Which Led to the Black Hawk War of 1832* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1970).

¹¹⁰ "Black Hawk," *Rock Spring Baptist*, reprinted in *Niles Weekly Register*, October 27, 1832, 132.

¹¹¹ "Black Hawk," *American Monthly Magazine* 8, no. 3 (September 1836): 268–79.

¹¹² Henry Ward Beecher, "Our Blameworthiness," in *Freedom and War: Discourses on Topics Suggested by the Times* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), 57–83, at 66–69.

of Tears in the winter of 1838–39 and a vicious cycle of in-fighting, labored to reestablish their society in Oklahoma in spite of the gloomy predictions of extinction that their white supporters in the East had despairingly advanced. As he struggled after 1840 to generate any interest among white Americans in the Indians' western future, McCoy believed that the Whigs and reformers who had opposed the Removal Act in 1830 had succumbed to their own doomsaying. McCoy clung to his original confidence that God would inspire a resurgence of the Indians in the West – “a grand scheme of deliverance” that would reconcile native peoples with God and the United States – but he became bitterly disillusioned by the “public prints and public speakers, professedly mourning over the Calamities of the Indians, [who] predict that they will still be driven from place to place, and protest that the tribes are as insecure on the west, as they were on the east side of the Mississippi.”¹¹³ There was a good deal of fatalism on the part of the Indians' former supporters after 1830, and even reliably antiremoval publications like the Methodist *Christian Advocate* and the Presbyterian *Missionary Herald* ran articles suggesting that removal, decline, and even extinction must be the will of God.¹¹⁴ McCoy rejected this, and insisted that Americans would be “blind indeed” to miss the providential signs of a grand civilizing mission west of the Mississippi. In spite of his appeals, the eastern audience for this vision of the Indians' future had vanished by 1840.¹¹⁵

Instead, the inhabitants of Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York embraced the watercolors of George Catlin, the anthropology of Henry Schoolcraft, and the novels of James Fenimore Cooper. What they found in these romantic and specious sources was an understanding of Native Americans as proud, historically static, and fated to live on in literature and art rather than in the shrinking wilderness of the West.¹¹⁶ (At best, in the writing of Catlin, Indians would be preserved in a national park alongside their natural partners, the buffalo.)¹¹⁷ The novelist James Hall and the former government official Thomas

¹¹³ Isaac McCoy, *History of Baptist Indian Missions: Embracing Remarks on the Former and Present Condition of the Aboriginal Tribes; Their settlement within the Indian Territory; and their Future Prospects* (Washington, D.C., and New York: William M. Morrison and H. & S. Raynor, 1840), 586, 581.

¹¹⁴ See, for example, *Christian Advocate*, May 6, 1831, 142; December 23, 1831, 66; November 16, 1832, 45; and *Missionary Herald* 32, no. 11 (November 1836): 444; 33, no. 1 (January 1837): 29, 31; 35, no. 1 (January 1839): 16.

¹¹⁵ McCoy, “Plea for the Aborigines,” *Western Christian Advocate*, March 29, 1839, 196.

¹¹⁶ Roy Harvey Pearce has argued that anthropologists and historians in this period rejected the view that the Indians were in a state of “precivilization,” and declared instead that their true condition was one of “noncivilization.” This informed the research agenda of Henry Schoolcraft and others but also encouraged the political assessment that Native Americans were doomed. Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1965), 120–34. Brian Dippie suggests that the idea of Indians as “vanishing Americans” gained ascendancy in the early nineteenth century, even as scholars and writers sought to encapsulate Native American experiences in studies and literature. Dippie, 12–27, 32–44. See also Wallace, *The Long, Bitter Trail*, 113–15.

¹¹⁷ Catlin, 1: 261.

McKenney produced a three-volume *History of the Indian Tribes of North America* that featured portraits of Indian leaders nearly three feet high. The readers of this enormous book must have imagined that McKenney and Hall had simply squashed their subjects between the pages to ensure their preservation for posterity, like dried flowers.¹¹⁸ The *North American Review* praised this rush to capture the static Indian in art and science, congratulating McKenney and Hall for preserving Indians “in a form to give them perpetuity, while the race itself is fast dwindling away.”¹¹⁹ Catlin described himself as coming “to the rescue of their looks and modes,” and emerging from his encounter with “hands and conscience clean, . . . a white man dealing with Indians, and meting out justice to them; which I hope it may be my good province to do with my pen and brush.”¹²⁰ This post-facto celebration of the Indian was presented as if Native Americans had actually vanished, instead of being forced hundreds of miles from their original homes.

While Isaac McCoy insisted that all the old problems – and the old providential promise – remained in the West, writers, artists, and anthropologists reassured eastern audiences that everything worth preserving about Native Americans could be found within the pages of a book or the frame of a portrait. Because the Indians had no history, they could have no providential role either. Native American leaders seem to have realized this danger too late. In 1836 John Ross tried to commission a history of the Cherokees from the writer John Howard Payne, declaring that “the only chance for justice for us is in History,” and urging Payne to produce a work that could describe the Cherokees’ progress and reestablish their place in human society. Payne was intrigued by the idea and saw a way to secure a “fairness” for the Cherokees in “future history” that “it might be impossible for me to excite for them from present legislation.” But Ross soon realized that Payne had succumbed to the same romantic fatalism that had overwhelmed the Indians’ other erstwhile champions in the East. The plans for a history came to nothing, and the U.S. Army forcibly removed the remaining Cherokees from the Southeast in the summer of 1838. John Ross was left with regrets, lamenting not only the ruthlessness of the

¹¹⁸ McKenney and Hall, *History of the Indian Tribes of North America, with Biographical Sketches and Anecdotes of the Principal Chiefs, Embellished with One Hundred and Twenty Portraits*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Daniel Rice and James G. Clark, 1844). On McKenney’s career, see Herman J. Viola, *Thomas L. McKenney, Architect of America’s Early Indian Policy: 1816–1830* (Chicago: Sage Books, 1974); and Viola, introduction to Thomas L. McKenney, *Memoirs, Official and Personal* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), vii–xxvii. On McKenney’s role in compiling the *History*, see Frederick Webb Hodge, introduction to Thomas L. McKenney and James Hall, *The Indian Tribes of North America* (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1933), 1: vii–lxi; Viola, *Thomas L. McKenney*, 251–80; and Pearce, 118–20.

¹¹⁹ “McKenney and Hall’s History,” *North American Review* 47, no. 100 (July 1838): 134–48, 136, 148.

¹²⁰ Catlin, 1: 16. A more self-serving example of this paradoxical benevolence came in the *New-Yorker* magazine in March 1838: “These Indians are to be annihilated – it is their fate – but we would have it rest lightly as possible on our heads.” “The Doom of the Indian,” *New-Yorker*, March 24, 1838, 9.

federal government but the circumscribed sympathies of “our white brethren” in the northern states.¹²¹

William Lloyd Garrison, a staunch opponent of Indian removal, continued to publish occasional articles throughout the 1830s that warned the United States of the providential consequences of its policy.¹²² He had even designed the masthead of the *Liberator* to emphasize the cruelty of the federal government toward both blacks and Indians: the illustration featured a slave auction in Washington and a series of Indian treaties that had been trampled into the dust. As the federal government coerced the remaining Indian nations into leaving their lands, Garrison’s hopes were dashed; and in March 1838, a few months before the Cherokees were removed, he quietly dropped the masthead.¹²³ Although the *Liberator* featured articles on Cherokee removal that repeated the threat of a providentialism of wrath, the paper gradually focused this threat on slavery rather than on Indian policy.

If Garrison could do nothing about Indian removal, he was more successful in his campaign against the American Colonization Society. He delighted in the society’s financial troubles, running articles in 1834 that trumpeted its \$46,000 debt and predicted the society’s imminent demise.¹²⁴ The ACS struggled to hold on to some of its prominent supporters (like the wealthy philanthropists Gerrit Smith and Arthur Tappan), and to counter public skepticism about the viability of black removal. Internal disputes further undermined the society’s effectiveness, and in 1846 the Liberian colonists won the right to declare their independence (albeit with the proviso that the society would continue to supply new emigrants from the United States). Free blacks and pioneering abolitionists like Garrison had attacked the providential claims that colonization would restore moral unity to American history, and the refusal of free blacks to volunteer for the colony undermined the ACS argument that Liberia would redeem the entire African continent.¹²⁵

Some southerners continued to see colonization as an attractive option: to the horror of many slaveholders, delegates in the Virginia legislature debated a statewide removal scheme in 1831. But the lure of colonization was slowly replaced in the South by a hardened proslavery. Proslavery theorists were

¹²¹ John Ross to John Howard Payne, March 5, 1836, in Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Papers of Chief John Ross*, 2 vols. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 1: 391; Ross to “A Gentleman of Philadelphia” [Job R. Tyson], May 6, 1837, in *ibid.*, 1: 490–503, at 502. On Payne, see Gabriel Harrison, *John Howard Payne, Dramatist, Poet, Actor, and Author of Home Sweet Home!* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1885); and Clemens de Baillou, ed., *John Howard Payne to his Countrymen*, University of Georgia Libraries Miscellanea Productions, no. 2 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1961).

¹²² See, for instance, “The Indians,” *Liberator*, July 6, 1838, 1–2; and “The Cherokees,” *Liberator*, August 24, 1838, 136.

¹²³ On the masthead, and Garrison’s opposition to Indian removal, see Hershberger, 36–38.

¹²⁴ *Liberator*, February 8, 1834, 22. See also note 39.

¹²⁵ Staudenraus, 226–240.

disparaging about the fudge of black removal and insisted on the need to win God's favor for the institution in the American present rather than the African future. In 1832 the Virginia economist Thomas Dew dismissed the idea that slave rebellions could be forestalled by gradual abolition and African colonization, and his defense of the South's existing order inspired an entire genre.¹²⁶ By 1835 the lines between proslavery and antislavery – which the ACS had done so much to obscure in the preceding twenty years – had once again come into sharp relief. This reorientation was hardly limited to the defenders of slavery. On the other side, the experience of battling the Liberian proposals (and their spurious providential rationale) had enabled free blacks and white abolitionists to hone a new version of judicial providentialism that might be as easily applied to slavery as it had been to colonization: If the United States continued to keep black people in chains, then God would humble or destroy the entire nation.

The idea of colonization cropped up in some unlikely places even after Garrison had proclaimed its downfall in 1834. Two decades later, Harriet Beecher Stowe sent the hero of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, George Harris, to Liberia. George had gained his freedom from slavery via the Underground Railroad, and in the novel's conclusion he mused over his options as a freeman in the United States or in Liberia.¹²⁷ Providence clinched the argument. Although George conceded that the ACS had been founded for dubious ends, he embraced its vision of an Africa of "mighty republics" and explained that God had "over-ruled [ACS] designs and founded for us a nation by them." Stowe recognized the incendiary potential of this argument and noted that blacks "ought to be allowed" to remain in America even after emancipation. But she developed an elaborate scheme of racial difference to explain the need for black removal, proposing that whites would guide the "destinies of the world" while blacks would cultivate moral goodness in Africa and encourage "universal peace" among nations. George declared that he would go to Liberia "not as an Elysium of romance, but as to a *field of work*"; and yet Stowe had sketched a rationale for Liberia that was no less romantic than the ardent colonization visions of the 1820s.¹²⁸

George Harris's transformation into a colonization volunteer seems the more surprising given that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* conditioned the nation's survival upon immediate abolition. In the book's last lines, Stowe warned that the "injustice and cruelty" of slavery would bring down "the wrath of Almighty God" upon the United States.¹²⁹ George's fate should remind us that, while the effective defeat of the ACS in the 1830s cleared the way for a direct confrontation

¹²⁶ Thomas Dew, *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832* (Richmond: T. W. White, 1832). See also Alison Goodyear Freehling, *Drift towards Dissolution: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831–1832* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

¹²⁷ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986; originally published 1852), 608–9. On Stowe's racism, see Dain, 228–29, and Fredrickson, 97–129. Dain offers a helpful note on the historiography of Stowe's racial thinking at 305.

¹²⁸ Stowe, 609–12.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 629.

between proslavery and antislavery understandings of providence, most Americans were still unwilling to accept the ideas and the priorities of William Lloyd Garrison or Thomas Dew. The romantic nationalism of the late 1830s and 1840s was an important and, to some extent, a calculated diversion from this providential confrontation over slavery. The antagonists in the slavery debate had therefore to contend not only with each other but with emphatic declarations of America's "manifest destiny" in the years before 1850.

More enduringly, Stowe's willingness to reconcile antislavery with black removal suggests that the new abolitionist argument about providence and emancipation had an important loophole. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* insisted that slavery was a violation of providence, but it did little to argue that God sought equal rights and racial integration as well as emancipation. Here lay the seeds of providential reunion between the North and the South, even at a price that might consign George Harris to Liberia, or the freed slaves of the South to a century of Jim Crow. Abraham Lincoln shared Harriet Beecher Stowe's faith in colonization and was equally hopeful that black removal might solve the enormous problems that would follow the triumph of abolition. Lincoln also appreciated *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and used Stowe's research to prepare his own arguments against slavery.¹³⁰ In the final paragraph of the novel, Stowe offered a way of reconciling the Union around a shared assumption of providential responsibility: "Both North and South have been guilty before God," she maintained, an insight around which Lincoln would construct his second inaugural address.¹³¹ Perhaps North and South could not agree on slavery, but they might eventually unite around a common providential guilt and an attenuated definition of black citizenship. If this compromise could be achieved, then historical providentialism might endure the challenge of its wrathful opposite and emerge from the "day of vengeance" that Stowe correctly foresaw.

¹³⁰ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 89–90.

¹³¹ Stowe, 629.

“Divided Destinies”

The Providential Meanings of American Slavery

On December 23, 1839, 219 years after the *Mayflower* dropped anchor off Plymouth Rock, Robert C. Winthrop rose to address the New England Society of New York City. The society could hardly have found a better person to deliver its annual lecture marking the Pilgrims’ arrival in America. A direct descendant of the first governor of Massachusetts, Winthrop was also a rising star in the new Whig Party: just thirty years old, he was already Speaker of the Massachusetts assembly and seemed destined for a congressional career. (He was elected to the House of Representatives a few months later.) From his background and his prospects, Robert Winthrop was superbly qualified to address the progress made by America in the six generations since his ancestor’s fabled career and to project a bright future for the nation in which he himself might play a prominent role.¹

The audience was not disappointed. Winthrop, treading in the footsteps of thousands of American orators, offered a familiar narrative in which the United States rose to global prominence under the direction of God. The landing at Plymouth had not merely determined the future of the English colonies but had shaped “the whole hemisphere” and shaken “the whole world.” Winthrop described a parade of providential events to contextualize the American achievement: God had hidden the American continent until the Reformation and the invention of the printing press; he had lured other Europeans away from North America with the promise of gold and silver to the south, leaving New England for the higher motives of the Puritans; and he had given George Washington the serene confidence that enabled him to challenge the world’s foremost military power in 1775. Preempting any critics, Winthrop insisted that he was not speaking figuratively. God had actually shaped the course of history with his “wonder-working Providence.” He also denied that this vision of American progress – a conventional, though finely turned piece of historical

¹ Robert C. Winthrop, *An Address, delivered before the New England Society, in the City of New York, December 23, 1839* (Boston: Perkins & Marvin, 1840).

providentialism – was in any way distorted by “New England bigotry” or “Puritan fanaticism.” With Washington as his witness, Winthrop reminded his audience that the story that had started at Plymouth Rock had been transfigured by the American Revolution and had “pervaded our Continent.”²

And yet, in the last days of the 1830s, Winthrop could not entirely ignore the political clouds that had recently gathered over the nation. Since winning independence from Mexico in 1836, Anglo settlers in Texas (and their Tejano allies) had petitioned Congress for annexation to the United States. This had ignited a debate in Washington over the propriety of bringing both these settlers and their slaves into the Union. In the fevered climate surrounding this debate, Congress had hastily decided to table all petitions relating to slavery, provoking the former president John Quincy Adams into a series of truculent protests that belied his advanced age. The Texas question and the “gag rule” bluntly demonstrated the persistence of slavery in American politics and, with the foundering of the African colonization movement on the opposition of free blacks and antislavery campaigners, it seemed harder than ever to find a place for slavery within the bright scheme of historical providentialism. Instead of ignoring this awkward topic, like most other patriotic orators in the antebellum years, Winthrop wandered dangerously toward the sectional controversy. He began slowly, indulging a little of the New England bigotry that he had renounced earlier, and quoting from two celebrated visitors who had toured the United States in the early 1830s. According to Alexis de Tocqueville, the “destiny of America [was] embodied in the first Puritan”; his compatriot Michel Chevalier, meanwhile, argued that one could make an American by mixing “at least three-fourths of the Yankee race” with “hardly one-fourth of the Virginian.”³

The thrust of Winthrop’s argument was not simply that Virginia and the South had taken a back seat in the development of the national character. Returning the audience to 1620, “the great Epoch of American destinies,” Winthrop daringly described another vessel that tracked a different course across the Atlantic just a few months before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth. This ship – “a Dutch man-of-war, and its cargo of *twenty slaves*” – brought the first slaves to North America with the same monumental force as the *Mayflower* delivered liberty:

I see those two fate-freighted vessels, laboring under the divided destinies of the same Nation, and striving against the billows of the same sea, like the principles of good and evil advancing side by side on the same great ocean of human life. I hear from the one the sighs of wretchedness, the groans of despair, the curses and clankings of struggling captivity, sounding and swelling on the same gale, which bears only from the other the pleasant voices of prayer and praise, the cheerful melody of contentment and happiness, the glad, the glorious “anthem of the free.” Oh, could some angel arm, like that which seems to guide and guard the Pilgrim bark, be now interposed to arrest, avert, dash

² Ibid., 21, 35–36, 12.

³ Ibid., 55.

down and overwhelm its accursed compeer! But it may not be. They have both reached in safety the place of their destination. Freedom and Slavery, in one and the same year, have landed on these American shores.

In the typical version of the nation's history presented on patriotic occasions, orators either accorded equal status to Virginia and Massachusetts in the colonial period or praised George Washington so lavishly that the most indomitable Southron could be assured of the national dimensions of historical providentialism. But Winthrop raised the prospect of an uncomfortable coexistence between the North and the South, in which "American Liberty, like the Victor of ancient Rome, is doomed (let us hope not for ever!) to endure the presence of a fettered captive as a companion in her Car of Triumph!" With an eye on his career in the Whig Party, Winthrop was hardly calling for sectional conflict to resolve the contradiction between slavery and freedom. But the idea of "divided destinies" casts a long shadow over the two decades between this oration and the Civil War.⁴

In the 1840s and 1850s, Americans debated not only the future of slavery but the purposes of God in permitting the enslavement of blacks and, ultimately, in bringing the nation to the edge of destruction. In the process, they revealed – sometimes inadvertently – the gaps and the contradictions in their own familiar story of providential progress. While moderates and compromisers like Robert Winthrop acknowledged the difficulty of fitting slavery into a progressive scheme for America, more radical voices in the North and South – promoting abolition or a new proslavery theory – were willing to sacrifice the idea of historical providentialism in pursuit of their own ends. There were grand distractions from this protracted and corrosive debate over slavery: this was the era of manifest destiny and its tumescent projections of territorial expansion. But the most ambitious proponents of romantic nationalism, who argued that God intended the United States to spread from the North Pole to the Panamanian isthmus, were unable to postpone a providential reckoning over the future of black people in America.

I. "The Fulfillment of Our Mission": Expansion and Its Critics

John L. O'Sullivan, the newspaper editor who coined the phrase "manifest destiny," came to the task of defining America's providential purpose unencumbered by the past. Whereas Robert Winthrop's family history was inseparably

⁴ Ibid., 55–56. Winthrop was not alone in making this connection – Washington's grandson, George Washington Park Custis, presented the same vision of "two barks" conveying liberty and slavery to the New World in a speech before the American Colonization Society in January 1828. *The Eleventh Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1828), 22–23. But the Dutch vessel that brought the first recorded slaves to Virginia actually landed in the autumn of 1619. Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 105; and A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., *Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the American Legal Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 18.

intertwined with the story of colonial America, O'Sullivan's ancestors hailed from Ireland and had forged their careers in the shadow of Britain's nearest colonial possession. O'Sullivan's great-grandfather was swept up in the efforts of Bonnie Prince Charlie to overwhelm the Hanoverian monarchy in the 1740s; his grandfather fought on the British side in the American Revolutionary War; and his father became one of the earliest American diplomats, serving in a variety of locales that were as dangerous as they were exotic. Unlike Winthrop, O'Sullivan could hardly thread a providential purpose through these diverse careers. (As if to confound that effort before O'Sullivan could give it any consideration, fate decreed that he should be born on a British naval vessel – during the War of 1812, no less.) But he achieved lasting fame for tailoring a version of historical providentialism to the bustling political climate of the 1830s and 1840s. In 1837 O'Sullivan used the money he'd received from the American government in compensation for his father's untimely death to produce a new journal, the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. Over the next decade, O'Sullivan edited and wrote articles for the *Review*, and turned it into the leading political publication in America and the most lively proponent of "manifest destiny."⁵

Although O'Sullivan did not coin that phrase until 1845, the *Democratic Review* disseminated manifest destiny thinking from its first issue. One particularly evocative example, written by O'Sullivan himself, appeared in the magazine a month before Winthrop's address in the winter of 1839. The title of the article – "The Great Nation of Futurity" – neatly encapsulated its thesis. Americans, urged O'Sullivan, should rush "onward to the fulfillment of our mission." The "high destiny" of the United States was "to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man." To this end, God had given the nation ample space in which to promote and extend its principles, an entire hemisphere that might support a "Union of many Republics" and the "hundreds of happy millions" who would people it.⁶ O'Sullivan's vision appealed to many aspiring politicians in the Democratic Party, which was seeking new talent to replace the retired Andrew Jackson and the lackluster Martin Van Buren. Against the backdrop of the financial collapse of 1837 and the shattering defeat of Van Buren to the Whig candidate William Henry Harrison in the election of 1840,

⁵ John L. O'Sullivan's father drowned in a shipwreck off the coast of South America in 1824, after vainly contesting the seizure of his ship and cargo by a U.S. Customs agent in Buenos Aires a year earlier. O'Sullivan's mother pressed a claim against the U.S. government for her husband's losses and, with the help of her son (and both Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren), she received the enormous sum of \$20,210 in 1836. (This provided the seed money for the *Democratic Review* and John L. O'Sullivan's other publishing projects.) O'Sullivan's early career is recounted in Edward L. Widmer, *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Widmer notes that Martin Van Buren himself played a major role in encouraging the *Democratic Review*: the editor of a rival magazine complained that the *Review* had been "suckled and papped in the grand official nursery of government patronage." *Ibid.*, 35. See also Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1957), I: 677–84.

⁶ *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 6, no. 23 (November 1839): 426–30.

some of the early *Review* articles seemed fantastic in their optimism about the nation and the party. (O'Sullivan moved the magazine from Washington to New York in 1840, as if to acknowledge that the Democrats were losing their grip on power.) But the Whig ascendancy was short lived. The economy improved, President Harrison expired after less than a month in the White House, and his successor, John Tyler, began to bicker with his cabinet and the Whigs in Congress. As O'Sullivan won election to the New York State legislature and broadened his publishing interests in New York City, his influence within the Democratic Party – and the audience for his views on manifest destiny – grew ever larger.

Today, most Americans who have encountered providential thinking would trace this to the 1840s. “Manifest destiny” has encapsulated an era of nationalism and expansionism for generations of historians and students. But O'Sullivan's ideas were merely the culmination of a much longer tradition of providential argument, a version of historical providentialism that shared a great deal with the rhetoric of the American Revolution and even of the colonial period. This particular variant became popular in the 1830s and 1840s because it could accommodate a number of different ideas and political positions that came briefly to dominate national politics. In its most guileless form, manifest destiny implied that God had transformed the United States from its humble colonial beginnings into a vast power that spanned nearly half of the continent; in keeping with the tenets of historical providentialism, this argument about the past also brought with it the promise of future expansion into the rest of North America – and perhaps beyond.⁷

⁷ The classic work is Albert K. Weinberg's *Manifest Destiny* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935), which presented the providentialist claims of the 1840s as expressions of an acquisitive American nationalism. A generation later, Frederick Merk produced a notable dissent: *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963). Merk's speculative argument insisted that manifest destiny was not an expression of national acquisitiveness but a selective perversion of a deeper commitment to spread liberty and other American blessings around the globe: the so-called mission of Merk's title. (Alfred A. Knopf observed on the dust jacket, in the last year of John F. Kennedy's presidency, that “in this sense the book has meaning for the present.”) More recently, Anders Stephanson has echoed some of Merk's concerns in his *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995). Although this book's principal focus is on the period between 1840 and 1890, Stephanson provides framing chapters that locate the roots of providential thinking in the seventeenth century and project the influence of these ideas through the Reagan administration. Recent scholarship on manifest destiny has tended to avoid the intellectual or cultural meanings of providential expansionism, instead revealing the various American anxieties that took refuge behind the apparently blithe optimism of the period. See, for instance, Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981); the essays collected in Sam W. Haynes and Christopher Morris, eds., *Manifest Destiny and Empire: American Antebellum Expansion* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997); Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism and Empire*, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); and David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Manifest Destiny* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003).

Alongside this basic formulation, manifest destiny appealed to statesmen and nationalist commentators who viewed the territory surrounding the United States as a vacuum that might easily draw in Britain or another imperial power. Providential arguments might generate popular support for expansion into these areas and could call God as a witness to American territorial claims (in the absence of support from international law eminences like Grotius and Pufendorf).⁸ Finally, and in the hands of more cynical exponents, manifest destiny could be used to make controversial objectives seem not only assured but consistent with the course of American history. During the Mexican War, as overzealous expansionists argued for the extension of the United States to the isthmus and even for the replacement of the existing Mexican population with a new wave of American settlers, this cynicism was assailed in the halls of Congress and threatened to contaminate the providential idiom entirely. But taken as whole, manifest destiny proved remarkably durable in the years before 1850. In the decade after that, the slavery debate burned over the ambiguous and shifting ground on which manifest destiny's proponents had briefly united.⁹

O'Sullivan could probably be located somewhere between the first and the second of these types, at least until he gave up the *Democratic Review* in 1846. In his years as editor of the magazine, his providential confidence in American expansion was rarely far removed from his anxieties about British and French violations of the Monroe Doctrine. He coined the phrase "manifest destiny" in an 1845 article on the propriety of annexing Texas, but his tone here was defensive rather than triumphant: Britain and France were trying to prevent "the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions."¹⁰ Similar anxieties shaped congressional debates over the proposed annexation of Texas and Oregon, and over the war with Mexico between 1846 and 1848, but most proponents of manifest destiny were remarkably single-minded and upbeat in staking their providential claims.

In January 1845 William J. Brown, a Democrat from Indiana, brought a map of North America into the House chamber, hung it behind the Speaker's chair, and discoursed to his fellow delegates on God's obvious intention to include Texas in the United States: "Whilst looking upon that map the other day," he told his colleagues, "I was involuntarily led to exclaim, 'how superior is the

⁸ British commentators, as well as a handful of U.S. congressional representatives, had an unfortunate tendency to invoke international law theorists to check American claims: see, for instance, "The Cuban Debate," *Democratic Review* 31, no. 173 (November–December 1852): 433–57, at 444.

⁹ On the political anxieties that formed the backdrop to manifest destiny thinking, see Sam W. Haynes, *James K. Polk and the Expansionist Impulse* (New York: Longman, 1997); Michael A. Morrison, *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and Hietala, *Manifest Design*.

¹⁰ [John L. O'Sullivan], "Annexation," *Democratic Review* 17, no. 85 (July–August 1845): 5–10, at 5.

wisdom of God to the wisdom of man!"¹¹ The following year, after Texas had been brought into the Union, John Quincy Adams tried a similar trick with Oregon. Adams had been the staunchest foe of Texas annexation in the House of Representatives, but he was convinced that Providence wanted the Pacific Northwest for the United States. When challenged on the basis of America's claim by Whig skeptics, he instructed the House clerk to begin reading from the book of Genesis to support his position.¹² Other congressmen rushed to apply providential rhetoric to their own visions of American expansion. A Mississippi senator looked to Mexico, Cuba, and Canada to complete America's empire.¹³ One of Brown's colleagues in the Indiana delegation suggested that "the finger of God" had written the United States onto the "map of the world" from the Behring Strait to Cape Horn.¹⁴ John Wentworth of Illinois, looking forward in 1845 to the imminent arrival in the House of Representatives of a "gentleman from Texas," hoped eventually to welcome "the gentleman from Patagonia" to the chamber.¹⁵

Similar sentiments suffused the debates over Texas, Oregon, and Mexico in the 1840s, both in the halls of Congress and in speeches and newspapers beyond Washington. Manifest destiny proponents received encouragement from the apparently inexorable progress of their political goals. John Tyler, who had held out against absorbing Texas long after Congress had approved the measure, finally signed the annexation bill in the spring of 1845 just before leaving office. His Democratic successor, James K. Polk, oversaw the successful annexation of Oregon in 1846 and the protracted war with Mexico, which spurred manifest destiny enthusiasts to greater heights of rhetorical abandon.¹⁶ Judging the sincerity of these figures is difficult. We can conclude with confidence that manifest destiny gained substantial traction with the public at large in the 1840s, but it would be hard to concede that every diviner of providence searched God's intentions with a holy awe. Sam Houston, one of the ringleaders of Texan independence, was appointed to the U.S. Senate after annexation and frequently cut a pious figure in debates over the Mexican War, comparing Polk to Moses and the Mexicans to the Amalekites.¹⁷ (This analogy was more flattering to Polk than to Mexico; God ordered the Israelites to "utterly destroy"

¹¹ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 28th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), January 14, 1845, 97.

¹² *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 1st sess. (House), February 8, 1846, 340.

¹³ Henry S. Foote, *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 2nd sess. (Senate), January 12, 1849, 236.

¹⁴ Andrew Kennedy, *Congressional Globe*, 28th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), February 1, 1845, 137.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, January 27, 1845, 200.

¹⁶ Polk himself, however, was a muted exponent of manifest destiny language and made very few public or private statements that indicated a commitment to a national providentialism of any sort. Polk's recent biographers have had little to say about this curious discrepancy between the president and the religious arguments for expansion, though there is an acknowledgment that "religion was second to politics in Polk's life" in John Siegenthaler, *James K. Polk* (New York: Times Books/Henry Holt, 2003), 14.

¹⁷ Sam Houston, "Address to the Senate on the Three Million Bill" (February 19, 1847), in Amelia C. Williams and Eugene C. Barker, eds., *The Writings of Sam Houston*, 8 vols. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1938) 4: 523-47.

the Amalekites in the first book of Samuel.)¹⁸ But at other moments, his mask of providential seriousness appeared to slip. At a Democratic Party event in New York in February 1848, Houston managed to compare the Mexicans to yet another benighted biblical tribe (the Ammonites), to affirm that God had instructed the American people to “pervade the whole Southern extremity of this vast continent,” and to conclude with a strikingly off-color joke: the “same mandate from God” that had guided the United States in the Mexican War would soon impel the nation toward annexation of Mexico entire, he affirmed. At that point, he recommended that his audience “take a trip of exploration there, and look out for the beautiful *senoritas*, or pretty girls, and, if you should choose to annex them, no doubt the result of this annexation will be a most powerful and delightful evidence of civilization.”¹⁹

There was, in truth, a rather seamy side to manifest destiny: the language escaped from the relatively dignified bounds of congressional debate into popular literature, drinking toasts, and the crowd-pleasing orations of nationalists and demagogues alike. (One could reasonably argue that, given its roots in O’Sullivan’s frenetic editorials of the late 1830s, manifest destiny more properly belonged to breathless articles and rousing addresses than to the formality of Washington politics.) It is perhaps surprising that manifest destiny held the floor in Congress for as long as it did. As early as 1836, as the Jackson administration seemed on the verge of intervening directly in the Texan uprising, William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator* printed an article by Boston abolitionist David Child attacking those “writers who assiduously watch the popular vane, boldly announce, that thus the wind sets, and that this is our *destiny*.”²⁰ This critique first reached a broad audience the following year, as the celebrated reformer and antislavery advocate William Ellery Channing addressed a letter to Henry Clay on the impropriety of annexing Texas to the United States. Channing, addressing the ubiquitous belief that “we are destined (that is the word) to overspread North America,” lamented that under this delusion “it matters little to us how we accomplish our fate.” For Channing, America could not achieve its destiny until it had abolished slavery: to diffuse American blessings, he argued, “we must first cherish them in our own borders.”²¹

These critiques of manifest destiny *avant la lettre* seem not to have spread far beyond antislavery circles until the flurry of expansionist activity in 1845, when Robert C. Winthrop carried them into Congress with formidable force. “It is not a little amusing,” he told the House of Representatives in a debate over the annexation of Texas, “to observe what different views are taken as

¹⁸ “Utterly destroy all that they have,” said God to the Israelites (in 1 Samuel 15) “and spare them not, but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling.”

¹⁹ Houston, “To the Fellow-Citizens of the Democracy of New York” (February 22, 1848), in Williams and Barker, eds., 5: 29–36, at 36.

²⁰ *Liberator*, August 13, 1836, 130.

²¹ William Ellery Channing, *Letter to the Hon. Henry Clay, on the Annexation of Texas to the United States* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1837), 61.

to the indications of the ‘hand of nature,’ and the pointings of the ‘finger of God,’ by the same gentlemen, under different circumstances and upon different subjects.” After concluding his speech with the droll observation that “the finger of God never points in a direction contrary to the extension of the glory of the republic,” Winthrop returned to the topic in a subsequent debate over Oregon, mocking “the right of a manifest destiny” and asking his expansionist colleagues to produce “the clause in *Adam’s will* in which their exclusive title was found.” In a final flourish that grouped the proponents of manifest destiny with Joseph Smith’s followers, Winthrop suggested that they search for this original title to the American continent “in that same Illinois cave in which the Mormon Testament has been discovered.” Winthrop took his seat once again, convinced that he had vanquished the right of manifest destiny and restored sanity to the House.²²

Winthrop already had reason to be wary of his standing as an arbiter of providential sincerity in Congress. In 1845, during an exchange with Representative William Yancey of Alabama, Winthrop had casually declared that John Tyler was an accidental president, marooned in the White House by the death of Harrison and therefore lacking a popular mandate to annex Texas. Yancey, alive to a trick, theatrically asked the House whether “the death of General Harrison was an accident,” then reminded his Massachusetts colleague that “an all-seeing and controlling Omnipotence” had determined Tyler’s succession. (Yancey could not resist the obvious barb and asked with mock horror: “A Winthrop deny the Providence of God?”)²³ In similar fashion, a number of congressmen responded to Winthrop’s dismissal of manifest destiny, turning the “Pilgrim ancestors” against their “recreant son” and schooling Winthrop on the true nature of American destiny. Strikingly, these challengers to Winthrop’s authority produced historical providentialism rather than Adam’s will to ground their belief in manifest destiny. No fewer than four congressmen, all from western states,²⁴ reminded Winthrop of a story with which he was surely familiar: the United States had received its mandate from God “before Adam’s dust was fashioned into man,” and its destiny had been vindicated in Columbus’s discovery, in the travails of Winthrop’s own forbears, in the heroism of George Washington, and in the extraordinary expansion of the nation since independence. “That destiny was found written in every age of our history,” maintained John Chipman of Michigan, claiming the territory from “the frozen ocean to the Isthmus of Panama (or the straits of Magellan)” for the United States.²⁵

Winthrop was not alone in questioning the motives of manifest destiny proponents or the logic of their argument. Caleb Smith of Indiana insisted that

²² *Congressional Globe*, 28th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), February 1, 1845, 294; and 29th Cong., 1st sess. (House), January 3, 1846, 134.

²³ *Congressional Globe*, 28th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), January 7, 1845, 88.

²⁴ The challengers were Edward Baker of Illinois, Andrew Kennedy of Indiana, John Chipman of Michigan, and William Sawyer of Ohio.

²⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 1st sess. (House), January 3, 10, 14 and February 3, 1846, 136, 180, 207, 301.

manifest destiny was a contradiction in terms. Although the “wild idea had extensively prevailed, and been much encouraged,” Americans should recognize that “it was not permitted to us to read the destiny of individuals or of nations.”²⁶ John Hale, a senator from New Hampshire, argued that Americans could not “take our destiny in our own hands, and control it.”²⁷ Outside Congress, the idea of manifest destiny was lampooned by the antislavery press and by more cautious observers. The *New Englander* magazine, which was no friend to Garrison or to the cause of abolition, suggested in 1848 that the Romans also had “a manifest destiny to fulfill.” Ultimately, “the question is not, what is destiny, but what is right.” As such, Americans should concentrate on moral precepts and “let destiny take care for itself.”²⁸ Critics upset any American pretensions to exceptionalism by identifying a rogues’ gallery of manifest destiny champions: Alexander the Great; the Romans; Hernán Cortés; Don Quixote; and Napoleon Bonaparte.²⁹ But in spite of all this, these opponents struggled to discredit the view that expansion was an integral part of America’s past and future. In 1848 one congressman despaired that manifest destiny seemed actually to have gained momentum since it had first entered into House debates in 1845: “At that time it produced general derision through the House. Now it is adopted as one of the popular issues of party!”³⁰

In accounting for the success and persistence of manifest destiny thinking, the indignant responses of those Western representatives who challenged Robert Winthrop are instructive. In Congress, there was little disagreement on the fundamental principles of historical providentialism. During the debates over Texas, Oregon, and Mexico, congressmen accepted the divine force behind expansion and looked forward to the ultimate diffusion of American influence throughout the world, but they debated the concrete actions by which Americans might link providential cause to global effect. Some disagreements concerned the extent of American territorial expansion. John Quincy Adams praised the acquisition of Oregon with a zealous providentialism that he turned against the annexation of Texas. Other congressmen raised questions of timing: perhaps the United States was destined to overspread the continent, but this would take more than a century to effect. Most often, the disputes concerned the method by which American influence was to be transmitted beyond the borders of the United States. One of the great attractions of historical providentialism

²⁶ Ibid., January 7, 1846, 159.

²⁷ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess. (Senate), January 6, 1848, 56.

²⁸ “Peace – and what next?” *New Englander* 6, no. 22 (April 1848): 292–302, at 294.

²⁹ See, for instance, the speeches of C. Goodyear of New York (Alexander), *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 1st sess. (House), January 15, 1846, 110; John Bell of Tennessee (Cortés), *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess. (Senate), February 3, 1848, 200; James Pollock of Pennsylvania (Quixote), *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 28th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), January 22, 1845, 356 and J. Dixon Roman of Maryland (Bonaparte), *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess. (House), February 25, 1848, 217.

³⁰ Jacob Collamer, *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess. (House), February 1, 1848, 283.

was the vagueness of its terminus: unlike apocalyptic providentialism, the proponents of a progressive destiny for America were not bound to reveal the details of how the world would be redeemed. But the arguments over expansion in the 1840s were rooted in the practicalities of war and conquest: territory would be taken, lives would be lost, subject peoples would fall under American influence. In this context, abstract debates took on an unusual urgency and American destiny acquired a cutting edge.

Manifest destiny's opponents had to define a different version of historical providentialism that might divert national policy from (say) the capture of Mexico or Central America. To this end, critics of the annexation of Texas and the Mexican War spoke of the "influence of our example" rather than the force of American arms, and they proposed to renovate the continent through "gentle unobtrusive influences" rather than a career of conquest.³¹ This view gained a famous adherent in 1847 with the publication of Albert Gallatin's *Peace with Mexico*. Gallatin, eighty-six years old, followed the example of John Quincy Adams (who died in 1848) in becoming a custodian of the nation's morals and history. Even older than Adams – whose "palsied hand" and "white spray" of hair had, in his final years, drawn comparisons to the improbably senescent patriarchs of the Old Testament³² – Gallatin had been treasury secretary under both Jefferson and Madison. Drawing upon memories that stretched back to the earliest days of the republic, he criticized the Polk administration for wandering from the path of historical providentialism. Gallatin affirmed that providence had guided the nation to its current exalted status but suggested that the true purpose of America had been clouded by the war: "Your mission is, to improve the state of the world, to be the 'Model Republic,' to show that men are capable of governing themselves, and that this simple and natural form of government is that also which confers most happiness on all." Gallatin was not averse to taking some Mexican territory, if this could be fairly purchased (after a respectful delay to restore some propriety to the transaction); but he was adamant that conquest was inimical both to American history and to the providential plan.³³

Talk of a purchase of Mexican land, or of the gradual rather than the sudden acquisition of territory, was an awkward reminder that there was a good deal of common ground between manifest destiny's proponents and many of its critics. The Whig delegation in Congress, anxious that the Mexican War might rally American voters behind Polk and the Democrats, largely voted in favor of the war bill in 1846 – in spite of the reservations expressed by many Whigs toward

³¹ James Pollock (D-Pennsylvania), *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 28th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), January 22, 1845, 355; and Archibald S. Linn (W-New York), *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 27th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), April 13, 1842, 13.

³² See, for instance, the speech of Joseph J. McDowell (D-Ohio) in response to Adams's claims that Genesis vindicated the U.S. claim to Oregon: *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 1st sess. (House), January 5, 1846, 77.

³³ Albert Gallatin, *Peace with Mexico* (New York: Bartlett and Welford, 1847), 12.

the martial forms of manifest destiny that had ricocheted through the House and the Senate for more than a year. Only fourteen Whig representatives (from a total delegation of seventy-seven) voted against the war; Robert Winthrop was not among them, and his unwillingness to challenge Polk's war earned him new enemies in his own party. (One of them was Charles Sumner, the Massachusetts senator, who upbraided Winthrop for political cowardice.)³⁴ The rest of the Whigs followed Winthrop's lead and – to the surprise of many of their supporters in the country at large – nominated Zachary Taylor as their candidate for the presidency in 1848. Taylor had helped to start the Mexican War in 1846, marching his forces on Polk's order into the Mexican territory between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande. The following year, he defeated the army of Santa Anna at Buena Vista, a defeat from which the Mexican leader never recovered. Taylor was not an antiwar candidate in 1848, a fact that delighted his political opponents. How could the Whigs rally behind the hero of a war that they had criticized? "Manifest inconsistency," crowed the Democrats, whose smiles were removed only by the American public's willingness to reward the Whig two-step on the war.³⁵ In November 1848 Zachary Taylor was elected to the presidency.³⁶

Antislavery campaigners, quick to decry the Mexican War and the annexation of Texas as insults to God, invoked wrathful visions of providence as the likely consequence of territorial expansion. Mainstream Whigs, meanwhile, labored to reconcile their core commitment to historical providentialism with the belligerent agenda of the expansionists in Congress. In the full glare of the public, Whigs tried to criticize the Democrats without abandoning historical providentialism or falling foul of the course of events. The result was a schizophrenia that was evident in the contortions of Robert Winthrop and, especially, in the pages of the new *American Whig Review*.³⁷ This journal was

³⁴ Sumner attacked Winthrop at length in his "Speech against the Mexican War," delivered at the Tremont Temple in Boston on November 4, 1846; reprinted in Charles Sumner, *Orations and Speeches*, 2 vols. (Boston: Ticknor, Reed and Fields, 1850), 2: 146–62. See also Charles Shackford, *A Citizen's Appeal, in Regard to the War with Mexico* (Boston: Andrews and Prentiss, 1848), 18.

³⁵ James H. Thomas (D-Tennessee), *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess. (House), February 9, 1848, 326.

³⁶ Michael F. Holt has argued that, the debate over the initial funding of the Mexican War notwithstanding, the Whigs forged an identity for themselves as an antiwar party in 1847 and early 1848. However, this impression of Whig unity must be qualified in three ways: a vocal minority of northern Whigs never forgave conservatives like Winthrop for supporting the war in 1846; the party itself strove to embrace the supposed heroism of American troops in combat even as Whigs in Congress attacked Polk for his handling of the war; and the spectacular nomination of Zachary Taylor (both a slaveholder and a Mexican War hero) as the Whig presidential candidate in 1848 only confirmed the fears of Conscience Whigs that the party had no principles whatever. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 233, 248, 274. See also Morrison, 66–95.

³⁷ On the *Whig Review*, see Mott, 2: 750–54.

established in 1845 as a bulwark against the *Democratic Review* and manifest destiny, but its editors searched in vain for a consistent response to O'Sullivan's maddeningly protean invention. In January 1846, five months before the war began, the *Whig Review* offered a paean to California and hoped that this "vast and magnificent region" would, in the "wisdom of an overruling Providence," fall into America's lap sooner rather than later. In June of the same year, after Polk had launched a war with the express purpose of seizing California, the *Whig Review* backed away from its earlier enthusiasm and endorsed the idea that America's "special mission" was to cultivate "the arts of peace" and to spread its influence by example. For good measure, this article predicted that the war would bring down the "curse of God" upon America.³⁸

The editors of the *Whig Review* ran several more articles in opposition to the war before its conclusion in 1848, but in March 1847 – just as the Polk administration seemed bogged down in its Mexican campaign – the *Review* featured an extraordinary article entitled "The Destiny of our Country." The essay claimed that the "origin, circumstances and progress" of the United States had been more "purely providential" than those of any other nation, with the possible exception of the Jews of the Old Testament. Taking readers on a tour of the Capitol building in Washington, the author grouped together three of the works of art that had recently been installed there – statues of Columbus and Washington, and Robert Weir's painting of the Puritans in Holland before their departure for Plymouth – which would "unite in declaring this the land of promise and themselves men of destiny." The article recognized the political controversies of the moment in a condemnation of slavery, and in the acerbic observation that the "spirit of conquest seems to have seized our government," but the *Review* regarded these as merely temporary obstacles to the achievement of America's destiny. Slavery would eventually die out; the "integrity of the Union" would be maintained because the existence of the United States was "a providential decree"; and, regardless of the current war, Mexico would ultimately "fall prey, not to force, but to a superior population, insensibly oozing into her territories, changing her customs, and out-living, out-trading, exterminating her weaker blood."³⁹

This was not the last word in the *Review* on the war: a few months later, another article took a different tack and criticized manifest destiny directly.⁴⁰ But the *Review's* reluctance to forgo its own versions of historical providentialism, or to present the debates over Mexico as a turning point between divine wrath and divine favor, gives some sense of the power of manifest destiny thinking to bind even its opponents to its logic. By 1849 the *Whig Review* had informed its readers that providence – rather than James K. Polk or Zachary Taylor – had delivered California to the United States, and that the acquisition

³⁸ "California," *American Whig Review* 3, no. 1 (January 1846): 82–99, at 85–86; and "The War with Mexico," *American Whig Review* 3, no. 3 (June 1846): 571–80, at 571, 572.

³⁹ "The Destiny of our Country," *American Whig Review* 5, no. 3 (March 1847): 231–29.

⁴⁰ "The Whigs and the War," *American Whig Review* 6, no. 4 (October 1847): 331–46.

of this territory marked “the beginning of a great American epoch in the history of the world.”⁴¹

Manifest destiny proved remarkably resilient to the different views of America’s future that seemed to divide Whigs and Democrats in 1845. This resilience stemmed partly from a lack of political courage on the part of the Whigs but also from a consensus between both parties on the lineaments of historical providentialism. All the same, the “great American epoch” vanished with astonishing speed in the debate over California and the Fugitive Slave Act, and manifest destiny made almost no impression on the long sectional crisis of the 1850s. This was due partly to disagreement among expansionists about how much territory they would take. Although the Whigs were feckless in their attempts to expose the inconsistencies among Democrats on this point, the conclusion of the Mexican War offered expansionists no refuge from the practical consequences of manifest destiny. Now that the United States had taken all of Mexico by force of arms, was it not obliged by the providential plan to annex the entire country and its seven million inhabitants?

Throughout the 1840s, manifest destiny had been shadowed in debates by the parallel but separate idea of Anglo-Saxonism, which held that the Anglo-Saxon race was capable of spreading its influence across the globe – and was perhaps obliged to do so by God or by nature. White Americans had long referred to the Anglo-Saxon roots of many immigrants, partly as a way of establishing a link between America and a longer European cultural tradition without simply declaring the United States to be the prodigal child of Britain. In the 1830s and 1840s, Anglo-Saxonism (like manifest destiny) provided a degree of cultural reassurance as America’s population was changing: the introduction of a more diverse array of European immigrants, particularly Catholics, prompted nativists and even supporters of immigration to celebrate the nation’s supposedly Anglo-Saxon roots. But Anglo-Saxonism increasingly implied an argument about race as well as culture: as European and American theorists groped toward a quasi-scientific racial hierarchy in the 1840s and 1850s, the proponents of Anglo-Saxonism maintained not only that Anglo-Saxons would spread around the world but that, in the process of so doing, the world would itself become Anglo-Saxon. If Anglo-Saxonism was defined racially rather than culturally, this was very bad news for all those who could not trace their ancestry to Shakespeare or Alfred the Great.⁴²

For someone of Albert Gallatin’s vintage, race was a much more fluid concept than Anglo-Saxonism implied. In his 1847 pamphlet *Peace with Mexico*, he was willing to concede that the “Anglo-American race” was superior to the “degraded Mexicans,” but he argued strongly that racial superiority did not confer “a superiority of rights” on Americans. “The people of the United States may rightfully, and will, if they use the proper means, exercise

⁴¹ “California,” *American Whig Review* 9, no. 16 (April 1849): 331–38, at 331.

⁴² Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*.

a most beneficial moral influence over the Mexicans, and other less enlightened nations of America," he maintained. "Beyond this they have no right to go."⁴³ Yet in the four and a half decades since Gallatin had taken his seat at Jefferson's first cabinet meeting in 1801, white Americans had largely succeeded in removing the Native American population from the bounds of their expanding society – or, to put it in the terms of many white observers, Indians had proved that the values of Anglo-Saxon civilization could not be transmitted across racial lines.⁴⁴ In 1848 the critics and proponents of taking Mexico in its entirety drew attention to the fact that perhaps five million Mexicans were of Native American descent: this implied either that the Mexican population would be eradicated in the near future or, more likely, that such an enormous influx of non-white people into the United States would pollute the republic.⁴⁵

Ironically, one of the architects of Indian removal – Lewis Cass, now a U.S. senator from Michigan – saw the danger of this resurgent and racialized Anglo-Saxonism in 1848, as he tried to maneuver his colleagues toward absorbing Mexican towns and cities in addition to the hinterlands of California and the Mexican Northwest. Cass denied that men could "fathom the designs of Providence," but he believed that Mexicans were capable of improvement and that "another career may be opened to them" through citizenship of the United States. The obstacle to this vision was the "eternal cant about the Anglo-Saxon race, as though that were the only stock from which virtue and intelligence could spring." Insisting on the diverse background of white Americans – who had come from France, Holland, Spain, Germany, and Ireland, among other places – Cass denied that the average American citizen was a pure Anglo-Saxon, and urged that all races be afforded the same courtesy and opportunity by the United States. Realizing that the United States was about to sacrifice an unprecedented territorial opportunity because of racial squeamishness, Cass argued that other peoples should be judged on their actions rather than on race or supposedly innate characteristics. At this point, he was heckled from the Senate floor: "And Africa too?" The challenger was John Hale of New Hampshire, a Free Soiler who had opposed the Mexican War and had earlier been expelled

⁴³ Gallatin, 13, 14.

⁴⁴ Gallatin's biography reflects both his fascination with Native Americans and the self-interest that mandated their removal: in addition to the internal improvements plan that he drafted for Jefferson and Madison in the first decade of the nineteenth century (and which encouraged further Anglo encroachment into the American interior), Gallatin was an ambitious land speculator and a pioneer of American ethnology. For a sense of how these competing priorities and commitments could coincide (and clash) in the lives of Gallatin and his contemporaries, see Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Jefferson and the Indians: The Tragic Fate of the First Americans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁴⁵ See, for example, the speeches of John Macpherson Berrien (D-Georgia), *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 2nd sess. (Senate), February 5, 1847, 301; Columbus Delano (W-Ohio), *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), February 2, 1847, 281; and John M. Niles (D-Connecticut), *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess. (Senate), February 9, 1848, 329.

from the Democratic Party for refusing to countenance the annexation of Texas.⁴⁶

Cass responded by insisting that he would prefer to “go on with our own race,” but Hale’s provocation captured an important truth about this moment in American history: racial distinctions had hardened, and the idea of a race-blind American destiny had faded from view. Cass either had to argue for the possibility of racial uplift, in which case he could be heckled as readily by John Calhoun as by John Hale; or he had to concede that American expansion would result in the extinction of neighboring peoples, an outcome that placed the progressive destiny of the United States in a rather different light. Before 1848, the expansion of the republic was predicated upon the notion that North America was a *tabula rasa*, an idea that had somehow endured the violent and prolonged engagement between whites and Native Americans. But the prospect of adding large numbers of Mexicans to the republic – of creating perhaps twenty new states, and forty new senators, who would begin to realize the process by which the “gentleman from Patagonia” would eventually take his seat in Congress – was sufficiently arresting to defeat Lewis Cass’s plans for a broader annexation of Mexicans as well as their land. At this point, when the possibility of uplifting America’s neighbors was removed from the providential frame, the question of expansion’s higher purpose once more threw the debates over California and the distant West into dark relief.

For John Calhoun, a steadfast opponent of the annexation of Mexico, the “high mission of heaven” that had been entrusted to Americans was “to occupy this vast domain” and to preserve America for the “Caucasian race – the free white race.” Calhoun, who proved less wary of the providentialism of wrath than his Whig counterparts, warned his fellow senators of a misguided faith among Americans that white institutions and liberty could be forced “upon all people.” If they continued to make this mistake, he promised, the “day of retribution will come” and “awful will be the reckoning.”⁴⁷ Calhoun established limits to American expansion, and suggested that his fellow citizens concentrate on expanding their existing social model rather than imposing it on other peoples. But by insisting on the racial limits of historical providentialism, Calhoun inadvertently focused attention on the South’s peculiar social model. The proponents of manifest destiny were able to sustain both political momentum and the narrative of historical providentialism only as long as the question of race remained abstract. Paradoxically, the success of manifest destiny proved its undoing. Abolitionists and defenders of slavery had been arguing since at least

⁴⁶ *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess. (Senate), March 17, 1848, 490–94.

⁴⁷ *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess. (Senate), January 4, 1848, 97–99. Calhoun finally voted for the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in March 1848, but he used his influence to counter the efforts of other Senate Democrats to promote the acquisition of Mexico entire. Calhoun’s opposition to the war is the subject of Ernest McPherson Lander Jr.’s *Reluctant Imperialists: Calhoun, the South Carolinians, and the Mexican War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980).

the 1820s that the most important question in the United States was what God thought about slavery, rather than the providential limits of American expansion. After 1848 these militant visions cast doubt not only on the progressive destiny of the United States but on the survival of the nation itself.

2. Slavery and Providence

"A Traditional Freedom Will Not Save Us": Antislavery Arguments

The abolitionist crusade remained a minority interest throughout the antebellum period, even in New England, but the prospect of additional slave states joining the Union broadened the ranks of those in the North who were willing to criticize both the institution of slavery and its place in American history. Abolitionists insisted that slavery was unscriptural and that its persistence in the South was a violation of God's ordinances. Antislavery campaigners added a providential dimension to this moral judgment. With an eye either on the progress of the United States or of the world as a whole in the middle of the nineteenth century, they suggested that slavery could not endure forever under the weight of an advancing (and divinely directed) morality. Charles Sumner, Robert Winthrop's chief political rival in Massachusetts, addressed his state's Free Soil convention in 1849 with a deep conviction of slavery's ultimate demise. Politics in the United States had long been governed by "material interests" like the tariff and the national bank, Sumner observed; but the cause of free soil was "an everlasting link in the golden chain of Human Progress." Although slavery had entered the political debate principally as a question of territorial governance, this human progress would eventually force Americans throughout the Union to choose sides: "Are you for Freedom, or are you for Slavery?"⁴⁸

Opponents of slavery developed two distinct strategies for fighting the South, drawing upon the Bible or the notion of an abstract code of scriptural ethics, and plundering recent history for evidence that the United States (and perhaps the world as a whole) was destined for better things. There were certainly dangers to the providential strategy here. For one thing, it was not entirely clear that figures like Charles Sumner actually believed in an interventionist God, and some abolitionists fretted over the dilution of their religious message in Unitarianism or the Transcendental thinking of Ralph Waldo Emerson or Theodore Parker. (Both were committed opponents of slavery.) At the same time, the idea of global improvement, which seemed to rest on a providence manifested entirely in human actions and the spirit of the age, hardly bound its users to an antislavery agenda. Perhaps the most famous apostle of this spirit of providential progress was George Bancroft, whose public addresses celebrated the advance of morality throughout the world but made no reference whatever to slavery. While Sumner opposed the Mexican War as a violation of the "law of human progress," Bancroft used his connections in the Democratic Party to win appointment as secretary of the navy in Polk's cabinet. (It was Bancroft

⁴⁸ Charles Sumner, "Address at the Free Soil State Convention, Worcester, Sept. 12, 1849," in Sumner, *Orations and Speeches*, 2: 292–331, at 296, 298.

who actually issued the order to seize California at the outbreak of war with Mexico.)⁴⁹ The conviction that the world was undergoing a moral renovation might easily collapse into the manifest destiny thinking that prevailed before 1850, subjecting its exponents to the same awkward fate as Robert Winthrop.

An even bigger danger with the idea of moral improvement in history – inspired either by providence or through a materialist understanding of the progress of humanity – was that it would encourage Americans to defer to God or the course of events rather than to challenge slaveholders directly. A common refrain from northern “moderates” was that the antislavery campaigners were impatient zealots and that their intemperate stance on slavery would destroy a reform process that was already under way. This simple argument could allow its proponents to oppose both slavery and militant antislavery, while taking no concrete action. Predictably, it held great appeal for northern politicians. On the floor of the House of Representatives, congressmen from Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New York sought to postpone the debate over slavery until some undefined point in the future, and to retain the focus of Americans on manifest destiny or less contentious issues than the growing sectional dispute.⁵⁰ This tactic of providential deferral also attracted many northern clergymen who felt reluctant to take a stand on slavery, partly from a desire to avoid creating political controversy but also as a means of maintaining the national organization of the leading American denominations.

The idea that the cause of antislavery was “moving on in God’s providence,” as Lyman Beecher put it in 1835, could hardly withstand serious scrutiny. Beecher’s providential quietism provoked a revolt by his students at Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, which was quelled only by the foundation of a rival college, Oberlin, more sympathetic to immediate abolition.⁵¹ On the floor of Congress, the repeated calls for patience and forbearance toward slavery “until God in his providence shall move the hearts of his people to blot it out” (as one Massachusetts Whig put it) eventually provoked a fierce response.⁵² James Brooks of New York argued in the volatile 1850 debate over slavery in the territories that God had already determined the fate of slavery, so Americans had simply “to await the decree of that Providence, and stand by it, whatever it may be.”⁵³ Perhaps it was his accompanying remark – that “no section of our country has anything to lose, but on the contrary everything to gain by this policy of non-action in this matter of slavery” – that prompted his colleague from New York, Charles E. Clarke, to rise to his feet. Rejecting the notions either that God had authorized slavery or that concerned Americans were to wait for God

⁴⁹ Lilian Handlin, *George Bancroft: The Intellectual as Democrat* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 214–16.

⁵⁰ George Ashmun, *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess. (House), April 10, 1848, 480; Richard Brodhead, *ibid.*, June 3, 1848, 650; Daniel S. Dickinson, *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 2nd sess. (Senate), February 28, 1849, 298.

⁵¹ On the Lane/Oberlin controversy, see Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 159–60.

⁵² George Ashmun, *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*.

⁵³ *Congressional Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st sess. (House), August 29, 1850, 1701.

to determine the institution's ultimate fate, Clarke offered his own reading of providence: "I believe that it is decreed that slavery shall not prevail in the Territories we have lately acquired; and I further believe that the laws which we are sent here to enact, are part and parcel of the means decreed for its exclusion."⁵⁴

The most militant abolitionists tended to bolster their affirmations of the lofty spirit of the age, of the progressive course of American history, or of the benign intentions of providence with a simple restatement of the providentialism of wrath: the United States would abolish slavery in the near future, or God would intervene directly to punish the nation – and perhaps to destroy it. Thus the opponents of slavery and of the removal of blacks to Liberia refined their arguments in the three decades after publication of William Lloyd Garrison's *Thoughts on African Colonization*, distancing themselves not only from historical providentialism but from the very idea of the United States. As early as 1833, the Boston abolitionist Lydia Maria Child argued that, unless the Constitution could be modified to abolish slavery, it would "chain the living and the vigorous to the diseased and dying."⁵⁵ Ultra abolitionists like Lydia and David Child, Wendell Phillips, and Garrison himself caused enormous controversy within and beyond the antislavery movement by calling for civil disobedience (including the withholding of taxes), a boycott of national elections, and even the sundering of the Union. Garrison's 1842 characterization of the Constitution as "a covenant with death and an agreement with hell" became a staple of southern attacks on the fanaticism of the North, but behind this fierce rhetoric and the apparent blitheness with which militant abolitionists contemplated disunion lay a commitment to antislavery that trumped historical providentialism. Garrison, Phillips, and their followers would rather dash the Union to pieces than subject themselves and the North as a whole to providential punishment.⁵⁶

This strategy of relying upon the providentialism of wrath was not embraced by every opponent of slavery, though it increasingly guided the careers of those white abolitionists in Boston and New York who were most skilled at attracting the public's attention. But the idea that God would punish the United States brought its own difficulties to some of slavery's most committed opponents, especially those free blacks who were struggling with a deepening northern prejudice and with the apparent consolidation of southern power at the capital. There was, for sure, a radical edge to the argument that God would humble America for its persistent sin. But what would happen if God's vengeance was postponed, or if it never materialized? Should free blacks wait patiently for God to destroy slavery, or would this providential deference restrict their opportunities to effect political change? These thoughts were especially troubling to Martin Robison Delany, the free black writer from Pittsburgh who worked

⁵⁴ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st sess. (House), August 30, 1850, 1274.

⁵⁵ Lydia Child, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (Boston: Allen and Ticknor, 1833), 228.

⁵⁶ James Brewer Stewart, *Wendell Phillips: Liberty's Hero* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 117–45; Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 313–36, 326–29.

with Frederick Douglass on the *Northern Star* newspaper in the late 1840s.⁵⁷ Delany shocked the *Star*'s black readership in 1849 with a series of articles attacking the providentialism of wrath. Delany noted that both slave owners and abolitionists urged blacks to take refuge in God, arguing that "the hope of heaven" was "alone sufficient to obtain every earthly and temporal desire." Delany was tired of waiting for God to solve the problem of American racism. African Americans should heed his words and abandon their long vigil:

We must be willing, because it is as contrary to nature as the blending of light and darkness, to cease looking to Providence to do that for us which God has given us the ability and means to do for ourselves. God works by means, and not by miracles. He has placed within our reach means for the accomplishment of certain ends; the application of these means will attain the end aimed at or desired.⁵⁸

According to Delany, God worked only through spiritual means. While he might be able to secure the salvation of a believer, he could not answer prayers directly or intervene in earthly politics. In the absence of divine intervention, Delany urged free blacks to "get to business": to develop commercial enterprises, to earn qualifications as professionals, and to leverage their economic power to effect political change. "Let us cease to mourn over what we have been taught to call the *will* of Providence," Delany concluded, "and raise up our heads like men."⁵⁹

Delany made the same point in a book published three years later, but by then he had given up the hope of securing black equality in the United States. In the intervening years, he enrolled as the first black student at Harvard Medical School but was denied the opportunity to complete his studies. As if to confirm his personal experience as nationally representative, his dismissal from Harvard coincided with the Compromise of 1850 and, in particular, the Fugitive Slave Act, which eroded the freedoms of northern blacks even as it bolstered slavery.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ For an account of Delany's career and thinking, see Cyril E. Griffith, *The African Dream: Martin R. Delany and the Emergence of Pan-African Thought* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975); Victor Ullman, *Martin R. Delany: The Beginnings of Black Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); and Floyd Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Emigration and Colonization, 1787-1863* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 115-231, 250-74.

⁵⁸ *North Star*, March 23, 1849, 2.

⁵⁹ *North Star*, April 13, 1849, 2; and April 20, 1849, 2.

⁶⁰ Griffin, 12-22; Ullman, 110-21. Ironically, Delany entered Harvard Medical School with two other African Americans who had been sponsored by the American Colonization Society. (ACS representatives undoubtedly used their influence to persuade Harvard's faculty to admit these black students; Delany took advantage of this new opportunity.) Although some white students and faculty defended the right of African Americans to receive training and certification, Harvard refused to readmit Delany and the other black students for the final qualifying term; and so they left the medical school without their degrees. This outcome was not well publicized at the time. Despite the formative nature of this experience for Delany, there is no mention of Harvard in his contemporary biography by Frank (Frances) A. Rollin, *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1883; originally published 1868). On the significance of the Fugitive Slave Act for free black thinking on the questions of citizenship and emigration, see Melish, 261-69.

In 1852 Delany channeled these frustrations into his *Condition, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, a pessimistic account of black life in America that revived the argument that blacks should build a nation outside the United States rather than fight for their rights within it. Claiming that most African Americans had done little more than “stand still” in the preceding decades, Delany argued that blacks “really expect [God] to do that for them, which it is necessary they should do themselves.” The Fugitive Slave Act confirmed for Delany that even northern blacks were mere “slaves in the midst of freedom, waiting patiently, and unconcernedly – indifferently, and stupidly, for masters to come and lay claim to us.” Delany dismissed the abolitionist movement as largely devoid of black leadership and animated by the same prejudices that sustained slavery. The only avenue of black improvement was mass emigration.⁶¹

Delany believed that blacks might mimic the colonizing efforts of whites by moving to New Granada and Nicaragua and claimed that this focus on Latin America would not prejudice the future of Africa.⁶² Perhaps the greatest irony in Delany’s revived emigration plan was that, in spite of his attack on the providentialism of wrath and his insistence that God did not intervene in earthly politics, he finally endorsed the notion that God had provided for the colonization of American blacks. (He was perhaps influenced less by the rhetoric of the American Colonization Society and its glorious visions of Liberia than by the manifest destiny appeals of American expansionists in the 1840s.) Beginning with the general statement that “the continent of America seems to have been designed by Providence as an asylum for all the various nations of the earth,” Delany claimed to see the “finger of God” in his South American plan:

God himself as assuredly as he rules the destinies of nations, and entereth measures into the “hearts of men,” has presented these measures to us. Our race is to be redeemed; it is a great and glorious work, and we are the instrumentalities by which it is to be done. But we must go from among our oppressors; it never can be done by staying among them. God has, as certain as he has ever designed anything, designed this great portion of the New World, for us, the colored races; and as certain as we stubborn our hearts, and stiffen our necks against it, his protecting arm and fostering care will be withdrawn from us.⁶³

Although he had maintained in 1849 that blacks should focus their efforts on economic progress within their existing communities, in 1852 Delany argued

⁶¹ Martin R. Delany, *The Condition, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered* (Philadelphia: Martin Delany, 1852), 38, 155. Delany was particularly concerned to disabuse blacks of the notion that their alliance with white abolitionists was a promising glimpse of a future equality between the races: “Instead of realising what we had hoped for, we find ourselves occupying the very same position in relation to our Anti-Slavery friends, as we do in relation to the pro-slavery part of the community – a mere secondary, underling position, in all our relations to them.” *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶² New Granada roughly corresponded to modern-day Colombia, with the addition of territory in what is now Venezuela and Panama. *Ibid.*, 172.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 171, 172, 183.

that continued residence in the United States would result in the “withdrawal” of divine protection (such as it was) from the free black population. In his earlier argument, he saw religion as “the great barrier in our pathway” to self-improvement; in 1852 he maintained that “Heaven’s pathway stands unobstructed, which will lead us into a Paradise of bliss.”⁶⁴ Mobilizing similar arguments in the ensuing years, Delany revived the notion of black emigration and articulated a distinctive black nationalism. He dismissed the notion of providential wrath even as he suggested that God had directed the “redemption” of blacks through political separation and the founding of a black nation.⁶⁵

Delany was not alone in identifying political pitfalls in the providentialism of wrath. Frederick Douglass was also ambivalent toward Garrison’s promise of divine vengeance upon America, and in the 1840s and 1850s he shuttled between the warning that American history was fatally contaminated by slavery and the more hopeful suggestion that the Declaration of Independence and even the Constitution were blueprints for a favored society.⁶⁶ But the trend of antislavery feeling in the North by 1848 was toward judicial understandings of God’s role in history. After the Mexican War, antislavery societies and newspapers kept up a constant pressure on the South and on optimistic visions of America’s future. As one Massachusetts orator reminded his audience at the close of the Mexican War, “a traditionary freedom will not save us. It will not do to praise our Fathers and build their sepulchres.”⁶⁷ The antislavery vision of history and providence gradually consolidated around the certainty of divine retribution, an outcome that seemed ever more plausible as the sectional crisis worsened. The abolitionists staked their claims on the idea that things were getting worse rather than better, and their lack of success in advancing the antislavery cause in Washington seemed to confirm their providential prescience.

⁶⁴ *North Star*, April 20, 1849, 2; Delany, *Condition, Emigration and Destiny*, 208.

⁶⁵ Delany continued to advocate a separate black nation until the Civil War and, in spite of his own efforts as a soldier and a commissioner in the Freedmen’s Bureau in the 1860s, he returned to the idea of emigration in the 1870s. See Miller, 264–67, and Griffith, 82–118.

⁶⁶ Douglass had drifted away from Garrison’s orbit in the late 1840s, and in the early 1850s he made a series of speeches affirming his commitment to political abolitionism and his skepticism toward Garrison’s calls for disunion. One of his regular addresses in late 1854 or early 1855 accused Garrisonians of focusing their efforts on dissolving the Union rather than ending slavery. (One version of this speech, delivered in Rochester on March 18, 1855, is reprinted in John W. Blassingame, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates and Interviews*, 5 vols. [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979–92], 3: 14–51. See also Douglass’s address to the American Abolition Society in New York City, May 14, 1857, in *ibid.*, 143–50; and his debate with the Garrisonian free black agitator Charles Lenox Remond on May 20 and 21, 1857, also in New York, in *ibid.*, 151–62.) But Douglass remained willing to entertain the dissolution of the United States, at least as a rhetorical device in his speeches. See, for instance, his address to the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society on May 22, 1856, the same day that Preston Brooks attacked Charles Sumner on the floor of the U.S. Senate: *ibid.*, 114–33.

⁶⁷ Shackford, 34.

“The Badges of a Fallen World”: Proslavery Arguments

The cause of abolitionism came to national prominence around 1830, just as the promise of African colonization began to sour for both antislavery campaigners and canny slaveholders. As northern critics lambasted both the institution of slavery and the South’s *faux-naïf* proposals for a glacial gradualism in Liberia, southern slaveholders were forced not only to defend slavery but to present it as something other than an awkward inheritance or an economic boon for whites. The pioneer in this was Thomas Dew, whose *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature* (1832) won him readers and celebrity even after his premature death (on his honeymoon in Paris) in 1845.⁶⁸ He was joined by many of the leading thinkers and political figures in the antebellum South: William Harper, the South Carolina judge and U.S. senator; James Henry Hammond, who also served in the Senate (where he made his famous “mudsill” speech on the nature of southern democracy in 1858) and who was governor of South Carolina from 1842 to 1844; and William Gilmore Simms, a novelist and editor who either wrote or published (as the editor of the *Southern Quarterly Review*) some of the most important literature of the antebellum South.⁶⁹ (The ranks of proslavery were also swelled by northern sympathizers.) From the pages of the South’s leading journals to the halls of Congress, proslavery adherents set about answering the challenge of abolitionists and squaring southern institutions with God and with history. While they achieved some success in their goal, they reconciled slavery and God in a pessimistic understanding of America’s future and its redemptive potential. Ironically, proslavery southerners joined with the abolitionists in dismissing historical providentialism as a dangerous affectation.

Perhaps the most pressing task facing proslavery theorists was to refute the suggestion that slavery violated the Bible or the dictates of Christianity. In his 1832 *Review*, Thomas Dew maintained that slavery had been “established and sanctioned by divine authority, among even the elect of heaven, the favored children of Israel.”⁷⁰ As a rule, proslavery writers had little difficulty finding passages of the Old and New Testaments that confirmed slavery as a biblical institution – even a Christian one. This was one of the strongest components of

⁶⁸ See Chapter 5, note 126 and accompanying text.

⁶⁹ On antebellum proslavery in the South, see John Patrick Daly, *When Slavery Was Called Freedom: Evangelicalism, Proslavery and the Causes of the Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002); Eugene D. Genovese, “Slavery Ordained of God”: *The Southern Slaveholders’ View of Biblical History and Modern Politics* (Gettysburg: Gettysburg College, 1985); and Michael O’Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810–1860*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2: 938–92. The issue of slavery is fundamental to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese’s analysis of southern intellectual history: *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders’ Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Southern understandings of the compatibility of slavery with Christianity are discussed at 505–27.

⁷⁰ Thomas R. Dew, “Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832” (1832), in *The Pro-Slavery Argument, as Maintained by the Most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States* (Charleston: Walker, Richards & Co., 1852), 287–490, at 295.

the proslavery case, and the defenders of the South quoted chapter and verse to refute and intimidate their abolitionist opponents. (At one public debate in Cincinnati in 1845, conducted by two ministers before a “crowded audience of great respectability” over four days, a proslavery minister delighted in the fact that his opponent had suspended the proceedings over the weekend – supposedly due to sickness – and was still unable to supply scriptural critiques of slavery on Monday morning.)⁷¹ There was an element of *sola scriptorum* about the South’s defense of slavery on Bible principles, especially in the hands of theologians like James Henley Thornwell of Charleston. In an 1851 address to the synod of South Carolina, he insisted that the Bible – “and the Bible alone” – was the cornerstone of southern religion and society: “Beyond the Bible she can never go, and apart from the Bible she can never speak.”⁷²

Although this reliance on Scripture provided a firm foundation for clergymen like Thornwell, virtually every proslavery advocate felt the need also to address the question of why God had allowed slavery to exist in the first place.⁷³ The Bible, once again, provided a starting point for this inquiry. Proslavery theorists offered a careful explication of the lurid story of Noah and Ham from Genesis, and especially of the curse that God had supposedly pronounced (through Noah) on Ham’s offspring.⁷⁴ This was a tall tale, even by biblical standards. After the flood, Noah and his family were marooned on the upper reaches of Mount Ararat while the waters receded, and to pass the time Noah had overindulged on wine from his vineyard. While Noah was intoxicated, his son Ham had sneaked into Noah’s tent and had come across his father’s nakedness. How Noah had become drunk and naked remained a point of careful speculation on the part of proslavery theorists. Perhaps Noah believed that the wine was unfermented, suggested one. Perhaps his clothes had “become deranged” as he turned in his sleep.⁷⁵ But the crime that followed

⁷¹ [Jonathan Blanchard and Nathan L. Rice], *A Debate on Slavery, Held in the City of Cincinnati, on the First, Second, Third and Sixth Days of October, 1845* (Cincinnati: Wm. H. Moore & Co., 1846).

⁷² James Henley Thornwell, “Relation of the Church to Slavery,” in Benjamin M. Palmer, ed., *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 4: 381–97, at 384.

⁷³ Because so many southern clergymen accepted the view that history was directed by providence, they could hardly do otherwise. Fox-Genovese and Genovese, 155.

⁷⁴ The story appears in Genesis 9:20–27. On the origins of the “curse,” see David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 64–68; and Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 39–41. According to Davis, 70, the idea of the curse had reached Portugal by the 1450s, just a decade after Portuguese merchants began to import African slaves into that country. For an account of the influence of this story upon proslavery thinkers, see Kidd, 139–41; and Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁷⁵ Josiah Priest, *Bible Defence of Slavery* (Glasgow, Ky.: W. S. Brown, 1852), 89–90. Priest’s book was originally published in Albany, New York, in 1843 and reprinted several times before this southern edition. For a discussion of Priest’s presentation of Noah’s curse, see Daly, 84–85.

was entirely Ham's responsibility. Interpreters disagreed on exactly what had happened, but Ham committed an act of depravity and then had the gall to invite his brothers, Japheth and Shem, to laugh at Noah's supine (and still-naked) figure. When Noah recovered, he cursed Ham's posterity for this act, and God decreed that Ham's son Canaan would always be a slave to his brother Japheth.⁷⁶

Although they lacked a well-defined theory of racial hierarchies until the late 1840s at the earliest, southerners had long identified the brothers in this story with modern racial groups: Europeans were descended from Japheth, Asians (and Native Americans) from Shem, and Africans from Ham.⁷⁷ In the 1840s, southern writers and even politicians recited the story of the curse of Ham as if, in itself, it explained both the legality and the origins of modern American slavery. The future president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, told the U.S. Senate in 1848 that the "curse upon the graceless son of Noah" continued to regulate slavery in the nineteenth century; in fact, the slave trade and the southern social system offered a "striking example" of how Noah's prophecy had been "wonderfully fulfilled."⁷⁸ Before 1850, when the noose began to tighten around the South, proslavery was still principally a language of persuasion rather than of defiance, and Davis's ability to invoke Noah's curse ran far ahead of his ability to persuade his colleagues that it justified southern slavery. One northerner succinctly dismissed the curse as "ludicrous," and no less a friend of the South than Lewis Cass rose during an 1850 Senate debate to suggest that Jefferson Davis and his friends take a different tack: "Southern gentlemen will allow me to say that they place the defense of slavery upon considerations which do not suit the spirit of the age," he began. "There is no use in going back to the age of the Patriarchs" when slaveholders had "a much better foundation for their rights to rest upon than any such process." Cass pointed out that no one in the South could be held responsible for slavery, that it was so entangled with southern society that no one could be expected

⁷⁶ On the ambiguity surrounding Ham's infraction, and the problems and opportunities it created for proslavery writers, see Haynes, 65–86.

⁷⁷ Ironically, the arrival of a pseudoscientific understanding of racial difference, and of the concept of separate human species endowed with different abilities, came into considerable tension with a religious commitment to the account of creation in Genesis. Noah's curse, which imputed racial differences to the providential punishment of Ham's offspring, was an imperfect compromise between the Bible and the claims of a new science. On this topic, see William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes toward Race in America, 1815–59* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); and Kidd, 135–49. For the specific example of Josiah Nott, the South Carolina proslavery writer who tried flashily (and not altogether unsuccessfully) to trump the Old Testament with the science of polygenesis, see O'Brien, 1: 241–47, and Kidd 144–47. O'Brien makes the important observation that, while southerners drew upon European racial theory in promoting the idea of black inferiority to whites, most Europeans did not believe that polygenesis could justify slavery. Thus most southerners, "when forced to choose between a proslavery God and an antislavery scientist, chose Jehovah as the weightier endorsement." O'Brien, 1: 249.

⁷⁸ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess. (Senate), July 12, 1848, 912.

to abolish it. "God in his providence may bring it about," he noted, but "I do not see that man can."⁷⁹

As Noah's curse seemed to win few northern converts to the cause of the South, proslavery advocates continued to look for a providential purpose in slaveholding. One possibility advanced by a number of books and addresses was that God had fashioned slavery as the means by which Africans might realize their limited potential in this world. Although the slave trade had its share of regrettable excesses, these theorists admitted, Africa was still so benighted that southern slavery seemed like an acme of civilization by comparison. Left to their own devices, Africans would fight one another and succumb to forms of slavery that lacked the regulation and improving tendencies of southern masters. In an act of breathtaking cynicism that must, regardless, have discomfited northern onlookers, some proslavery theorists (including Thomas Dew) even produced the fate of the Indians to argue for the benign effects of slavery. Perhaps, argued these most opportunistic voices, the near extermination of America's native population might have been avoided if white settlers had been more assiduous about enslaving their new neighbors. Or perhaps the pride of the Indians, manifested in their bravery and their martial refusal to submit to slavery, had contributed to a providential paradox: their superiority to blacks had nonetheless resulted in their disappearance, while the African population actually increased despite (or because of) slavery.⁸⁰

This argument was not far removed from the providential justification for colonization, whereby God had fashioned the entire scheme of American slavery to produce a cadre of black missionaries who might eventually redeem the African continent. Predictably, some proslavery theorists continued to make the case for this understanding of providence even into the 1850s, by which time northern free blacks and antislavery campaigners had spent more than two decades attacking the American Colonization Society. One variant that emerged briefly in the debates over Texas in 1844 and 1845 held that Mexico rather than Africa might be the eventual destination for the emancipation of the slaves, and that the "counsels of the Almighty" (in the words of future president James Buchanan) had determined that Texas would "gradually draw off the slaves of the South" and funnel the nonwhite population out of the United States.⁸¹

⁷⁹ George Cheever dismissed the idea of Noah's curse as a "ludicrous and wicked refuge of oppression" in his *God Against Slavery: And the Freedom and Duty of the Pulpit to Rebuke It, As a Sin Against God* (Cincinnati: American Reform Tract and Book Society, [1857]), 100. Lewis Cass, *Congressional Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st sess. (Senate), February 20, 1850, 399.

⁸⁰ Dew, 332, claimed that, "strange as it may seem," a "much greater number of Indians" would have survived in the United States had white Americans "rigidly persevered in enslaving them." Fox-Genovese and Genovese, 188–94, briefly discuss the impact of Native Americans on white southerners' views of themselves and their history.

⁸¹ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 28th Cong., 1st sess. (Senate), June 8, 1844, 721–22. Other exponents of the race-funnel argument included John W. Tibbatts of Kentucky, *ibid.* (House), May 7, 1844, 450; and Charles Jared Ingersoll of Pennsylvania, *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 28th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), January 3, 1845, 86.

Mexico would provide a more propitious environment in which the former slaves could prove their worth without “prejudice against their color.”⁸² A more enduring proslavery tactic was to point to Liberia or Africa more generally as the eventual home of the South’s slaves, though southerners were careful to insist that this outcome was for the distant future. Addressing a crowd in Boston in 1855, Sam Houston gauged his audience cleverly by endorsing colonization “at some future day,” but he emphasized that the trick would be to “get rid of them little by little.” Perhaps this outcome lay in “the womb of futurity,” though he averred that the ultimate fate of slavery was something “which we cannot foresee.”⁸³

These various attempts to ground proslavery in providential actions achieved only modest success, and Sam Houston was not the only southern defender of slavery to rest his case in uncertainty about God’s intentions. Democratic congressman James McDowell of Virginia, addressing the House in 1849, was convinced that God would reveal the purpose of slaves “in due time”; until that moment, McDowell was unsure as to whether blacks were supposed to labor perpetually for the sons of Japheth south of the Mason-Dixon line or to renovate the continent of Africa.⁸⁴ Perhaps, announced his colleague from Mississippi, William McWillie, blacks would receive a “compensating providence” for which slavery was a form of probation.⁸⁵ South Carolina senator George McDuffie was candid in admitting his ignorance about the purpose of the African race, suggesting that even a “philanthropist will be just as much puzzled to ascertain the inscrutable purpose of God in placing such beings upon the face of the earth, as for what purpose he crated scorpions or rattlesnakes.”⁸⁶ McDuffie tried regardless to advance the idea that God had selected southern slavery as the only means by which blacks could be improved, but the specter of Nat Turner’s uprising in Virginia – and the persistent white anxiety that another revolt could break out at any moment – hardly suggested that blacks themselves viewed slavery as their best opportunity for advancement. George Cheever, who became one of the most prominent antislavery voices in the northern clergy during the 1850s, openly mocked the idea that slavery was the “chosen missionary institute of the Lord Almighty.” If slavery brought only a “millennium of sin and misery” to its supposed beneficiaries, Cheever argued, it could hardly be said to advance God’s plan for the world.⁸⁷

⁸² In this, Buchanan displayed very little awareness of Mexican attitudes toward race in the mid-nineteenth century.

⁸³ Sam Houston, “Speech at the Tremont Temple, Boston,” February 22, 1855, in Williams and Barker, eds., 6: 167–77, at 173.

⁸⁴ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), February 23, 1849, 217–19.

⁸⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st sess. (House), March 4, 1850, 447.

⁸⁶ *Congressional Globe*, 28th Cong., 1st sess. (Senate), May 23, 1844, 532.

⁸⁷ George Cheever, *The Fire and Hammer of God’s Word Against the Sin of Slavery* (New York: American Abolition Society, 1858), 6.

Although many southerners were attracted to providential interpretations that dignified the institution of slavery and the role of the South in maintaining it, the dangers of progressive rhetoric were acknowledged by proslavery theorists from Thomas Dew onward. The idea of moral improvement through history had seduced many Virginia representatives during 1831 and 1832, with the result that the state had come dangerously close to abolishing slavery. Dew was keen to prevent a reprise of this in any other southern forum. In his 1832 tract, he questioned the idea of progressive moral improvement by reminding his fellow southerners that the "relations of society cannot be altered in a day," and he advised them instead to approach both the problems and the possibilities of the slave system with a pragmatic conservatism. In general, schemes for moral renovation promised more than they delivered and, without a direct sign from God (of the sort that the Israelites had relied upon in the Old Testament), Virginia legislators should approach the colonization of their slaves with caution.⁸⁸ While some southern congressmen stretched for more elaborate interpretations of history that would present the South as an agent of providential progress, proslavery theorists tended to move in the opposite direction: the South, unlike the North, recognized the imperfections of the world and the need to prepare for a better life in heaven. Whereas northern reformers and their European cousins pushed forward social innovations that would do more harm than good, the South would maintain its institutions and would look toward redemption in the life to come.⁸⁹

One man who seemed particularly well qualified to discourse on the sinfulness of the mortal world was James Henry Hammond, whose political career (and staunch defense of slavery) was punctuated by extraordinary personal scandals. In 1844 he was forced out of the governor's mansion in Charleston after rumors began to spread of his sexual relationship with four of his nieces; in the 1850s he found his way to the U.S. Senate in spite of his very public estrangement from his wife, who had left Hammond after his refusal to abandon his slave mistress (who bore several of his children).⁹⁰ In 1845 Hammond addressed the question of slavery in two public letters to the English abolitionist Thomas Clarkson. These were reprinted in 1849 in *De Bow's Review*, a commercial and political journal founded in New Orleans that became the

⁸⁸ Dew, 490.

⁸⁹ In this respect, my findings diverge from those of Jack P. Maddex Jr., who has argued that southerners imagined slavery as an instrument for advancing the millennium: "Proslavery Millennialism: Social Eschatology in Antebellum Southern Calvinism," *American Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 46–62. Fox-Genovese and Genovese, 152–53, discuss the tension between linear and cyclical views of history in the reading and thinking of white southerners.

⁹⁰ For a sketch of Hammond's public and private activities, see the introduction to Carol Bleser, ed., *Secret and Sacred: The Diaries of James Henry Hammond, a Southern Slaveholder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). For Hammond's view of slavery, see O'Brien, 2: 953–59.

South's leading periodical in the 1850s. Hammond noted soberly of humanity that "our relations with one another are real, and not ideal," and grouped slavery with a number of social ills that elicited regret from any compassionate individual: poverty, sickness, deformity, and so on. Hammond felt sympathy for the people afflicted in these ways, but to hope for the abolition of slavery was to imagine that mankind would be rescued from such unfortunately ubiquitous conditions. "I love perfection," Hammond maintained, "and I think I should enjoy a millennium such as God has promised." But such a happy outcome could not be hastened by human action, which tended to make things even worse by substituting fallible human reason for divine wisdom. Better to recognize the limitations of this world and to concentrate on establishing one's fitness for the next.⁹¹

The defenders of slavery used the same argument in a variety of contexts. During the House debates over Texas, future president Andrew Johnson of Tennessee clashed with former president John Quincy Adams over the providential meaning of antislavery. Adams had implied that abolition would "consummate" Christianity; Johnson accused Adams of engaging in misplaced millenarianism. Like Hammond, Johnson told the House of his hopes that "that [millennial] day would come," and he promised that, if there was a chance that abolition would hasten this day, he would be "found standing on tiptoe, anxiously endeavoring to descry in the eastern horizon the first streaks of that glorious morning." But, in the darkness that preceded the millennial dawn, Adams's groping toward abolition was more likely to set back the cause of human progress than to advance it.⁹²

This point was made most forcibly by the South Carolina clergyman James Henley Thornwell, who was probably the most celebrated southern theologian of the antebellum era.⁹³ In 1850 Thornwell published his sermon on *The Rights and Duties of Masters*, a comprehensive defense of slavery that rooted the institution in the imperfections of mortal life. Like Hammond and Johnson, Thornwell acknowledged that poverty, sickness, and slavery were offensive to Christian sentiments, but he insisted on their place in the scheme of salvation: "These are the badges of a fallen world," he observed, and it was not for mortals to abolish them or to question the wisdom of God in allowing them to continue. At the heart of this vision was a staunch realism about the limitations of human experience. The "institutions of the present" should not be judged "by the standards of the future life," and ambitious reformers should remember that earth was not the theater for God's glory but the stage for the "moral probation

⁹¹ James Henry Hammond, "Slavery at the South," *De Bow's Review* 7, no. 4 (October 1849): 289–97, at 292.

⁹² *Congressional Globe*, 28th Cong., 1st sess. (House), December 22, 1843, 65 (Adams); and January 31, 1844, 215 (Johnson).

⁹³ O'Brien, 2: 1149–57, examines the relationship between Thornwell's theology and his ideas about slavery. O'Brien also suggests that this southern pessimism about the possibility of human improvement was influenced by a similar intellectual shift in Europe. See, for instance, the letter of Alexis de Tocqueville to the Comte de Gobineau in 1853, reprinted in O'Brien, 1: 221.

of man." Slavery might easily be "one of the schools in which immortal spirits are trained for their final destiny," and to abolish this school was to reverse the relation between this life and the salvation that would succeed and transcend it in heaven.⁹⁴

The argument that the United States was simply an outpost in a "fallen world" allowed proslavery theorists to eschew a progressive scheme for slavery and to couch the southern social system in a realism that was as pious as it was convenient. It also opened new angles of attack on the abolitionists, who could now be held accountable for every fanciful scheme of social improvement that had ended badly. In his 1850 sermon, Thornwell even argued that God had allowed slavery to become embattled by moral reformers in the North and in Europe precisely to reveal what was at stake in this contest: it was not a battle between slavery and liberty, but between "the friends of order and regulated freedom" on one side and the advocates of "mad speculations" on the other. The South was arrayed against William Lloyd Garrison and his allies, but also against "Atheists, Socialists, Communists, Red Republicans, Jacobins," and anyone else who dreamed of changing the world for the better.⁹⁵ Proslavery writers were particularly fond of the analogy between abolitionism and the French Revolution, another instance in which the perfectionist idea had been followed to its impious and bloody conclusion.⁹⁶ They looked on with quiet satisfaction as the European upheavals of 1848 disappointed their American supporters.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, as famous a slaveholder as Thomas Jefferson could be strongly rebuked in proslavery literature for his political romanticism. Jefferson's sympathies with the French Revolution were linked to his famously expurgated Bible, and the former president was remembered by proslavery writers as a misguided advocate of universal liberty rather than a lifelong slaveholder who never made his deeds conform to his words.⁹⁸

Attacks on the French Revolution were, perhaps, to be predicted, though proslavery thinkers were creative in their ability to blame New England for America's enthusiasm in 1789. (Southern Democrats were the more obvious descendants of these enthusiasts, as the proslavery attacks on Jefferson might have implied.) But proslavery thinkers went further than simply attacking Robespierre or Jefferson and turned their sights on the American Revolution as well. Again, this maneuver was partly forced upon southerners by the unwitting antislavery emphasis of the Declaration of Independence and its famous preamble. Harriet Martineau, the British reformer, had argued on her visit to the United States in 1834–36 that Americans should live up to their founding

⁹⁴ James Henley Thornwell, *The Rights and the Duties of Masters: A Sermon, Preached at the Dedication of a Church, Erected in Charleston, S.C., For the Benefit and Instruction of the Coloured Population* (Charleston: Walker & James, 1850), 32, 33, 43, 44.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12, 14.

⁹⁶ Fox-Genovese and Genovese, 11–40.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41–68, 688–99.

⁹⁸ See, for example, Iveson L. Brookes, *A Defence of the South, Against the Reproaches and Incroachments of the North* (Hamburg, S.C.: Printed at the Republican Office, 1850), 22.

principles and emancipate their slaves.⁹⁹ William Gilmore Simms, in an 1837 response to Martineau, denied that the “doctrine of universal equality” had ever been accepted by the famously haughty John Adams and suggested that the “aristocrats of Carolina” could only have signed the Declaration with “monstrous wry faces.” Although Simms admired the Founding Fathers for their courage in the face of British threats, he thought that they were “not in the best mood to become philosophers” when riled by George III and his disdainful treatment of the colonies. The Revolution was a battle not for universal principles but for the more modest goal of insisting that Britons and (white, male) Americans had the same blood and the same political rights.¹⁰⁰ Searching for a more appropriate statement of social relations than the Declaration’s preamble, Simms produced Ulysses’ famous speech on the virtues of inequality from Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*. “God has not created men alike, or equal,” Simms concluded, and to believe otherwise was to risk the “sanguinary fruits” produced by the French experiment.¹⁰¹

Southern anxieties about slavery were cauterized in these attacks on abolitionism, Thomas Jefferson, and even the Declaration of Independence; but the South’s defenders paid for this relief with a loss of national feeling. The idea of the United States as a divine imperative, and of the South as an integral participant in historical providentialism, was pushed beyond its breaking point by the need to explain and account for slavery. In 1851 the *Edinburgh Review* published a stinging article that presented the South (and slavery) as a drag on the moral and political progress of American history. An angry response in *De Bow’s Review* dismissed the *Edinburgh Review*’s implication that New England was effectively the United States – “that she is the nation” – and dismantled the historical providentialism that constituted the “never-failing theme” of American Independence Day orators. This southern response supplied an inverted narrative of America’s origins that had the Puritans banishing Roger Williams and hanging the witches of Salem. Plotting these grim northern achievements into an even darker future, the author glimpsed the modern-day Puritans of New England encouraging the emergence of a new Robespierre and plotting a reenactment of “the tragedy of San Domingo” in the fields of the

⁹⁹ Martineau’s account of her tour of America, published in London in 1837, explicitly identified the “mockery” that slavery made of “the principle that all men are born free and equal.” Deborah Anna Logan, *Harriet Martineau: Writings on Slavery and the American Civil War* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), 14.

¹⁰⁰ William Gilmore Simms, “The Morals of Slavery,” in *The Pro-Slavery Argument*, 174–285, at 252, 249. Simms’s tract was based on his 1837 review of *Society in America*, originally published as “Miss Martineau on Slavery,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 3, no. 11 (November 1837): 641–57.

¹⁰¹ “Miss Martineau on Slavery,” 652–53. Simms was not the first southerner to reach for this speech in justifying slavery. O’Brien, 2: 940, notes that the same lines were used by Edward Brown of Charleston as the epigraph for his pamphlet *Notes on the Origin and Necessity of Slavery* (1826).

South.¹⁰² At the same time as the proslavery position allowed for this rejection of a shared narrative of national progress and purpose, its emphasis on the fallen world and the limited scope for social amelioration hardly provided the building blocks of an optimistic southern nationalism.

One of the last major proslavery tracts before the outbreak of the Civil War, by the Savannah clergyman Joseph Stiles, betrayed the shifting focus of proslavery writing in its title: *Modern Reform Examined*. Stiles, like many southern writers, attacked the abolitionists for assuming that they could invest their political agenda with providential authority. Northern reformers constantly regaled Americans with the idea that “the developments of providence” and the “light of the age” dictated sweeping changes in society, and yet in so doing they effectively historicized the Bible and presented God’s scriptural edicts as anachronisms. Stiles responded with a direct challenge: “But say, friend! does not the light of revelation exactly extinguish your light of providence?” Stiles insisted that the teachings of the Bible on slavery “settle these questions forever” and that the providential determination of the abolitionists was based only on “fallible intelligence” that would make a nonsense of religion if it were allowed to trump Scripture:

There are the providential developments, you say! Grant it! But what do they declare? What voice do they utter? What lesson do they teach? You say: “They teach my doctrine.” How do you know that? Advance directly to the point, and tell me! How, how do you know it? Why, your *fallible* intelligence *thinks* so. Yes! and this *is all!* this *is all!* Ah! what have you done? You have taken away my Bible from me! You have taken away from me the *only sure light!* the light of God’s *infallible truth!* . . . You have embarked me again on that broad and shoreless ocean of doubt and darkness which overwhelmed my race at the fall, with no *better bottom* under me than your own wretched, *wretched inferences!*

And yet Stiles himself, in the same tract, could not resist the temptation to offer his own providential assessment of slavery’s purpose. God meant for Africans to gain learning and Christianity in America, and eventually to spread the blessings of civilization across Africa. This plan was “clearly inaugurated by Providence himself, and therefore free from the peril of a proposal by a North man or a South man, or a man at all.” It offered the prospect of national glory and the certainty of success, and was perhaps the means chosen by God for reconciliation of the sectional crisis. “Fidelity to God’s great Africo-American missionary enterprise” might realize God’s “great providential mandate” and offer “the only safeguard against national peril.”¹⁰³

¹⁰² “The Edinburgh Review and the Southern States,” *De Bow’s Review* 10, no. 5 (May 1851): 512–25, at 512, 519. Fox-Genovese and Genovese, 660–68, discuss southern antipathy toward “the history and legacy of Puritanism.”

¹⁰³ Joseph C. Stiles, *Modern Reform Examined; or, The Union of North and South on the Subject of Slavery* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1857), 99–103, 196, 231, 235.

Stiles's book gives some sense of the problems facing proslavery writers, who found themselves backing into a corner with only their Bibles and their insistence upon human fallibility for company.¹⁰⁴ Stiles's animated endorsement of a broader mission was unusual in proslavery writings, but his simultaneous (and inconsistent) dismissal of providential speculation confirmed the awkward position that had been reached by southern thinkers on the eve of the Civil War. Invited to choose between a social and scriptural conservatism or a progressive destiny for slavery, Stiles opted for both and produced a tract of disorienting contradictions. Most southern writers chose to cultivate the former option alone and drew up their lines against the North in the name of defending what they already had rather than transforming the world. Proslavery thinking, like abolitionism, was prepared to abandon the idea of a progressive destiny for America in the name of resolving the crisis over slavery. In fact, the militant opponents of historical providentialism were willing to sacrifice the nation entirely.

3. "The Key to American History": Slavery and the Rationale for Secession

Robert Winthrop was one of the casualties of the deepening sectional controversy. Having won election to the Speaker's chair in the House of Representatives in 1847, in spite of opposition from the "Conscience Whigs" who deplored his equivocal stance on the Mexican War, Winthrop was appointed to the Senate in 1850 as the replacement for incoming secretary of state, Daniel Webster. But in the ensuing election for the seat, he found himself caught between the Free Soil candidate, Charles Sumner – who had assailed Winthrop for his position on the war – and Webster himself, who was incensed at Winthrop's refusal to support the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 and who declined to endorse his successor.¹⁰⁵ In perhaps the high point of his career, Winthrop had delivered the oration in 1848 on the laying of the foundation stone for the Washington Monument. But his confident rhetoric on that occasion about America's glorious providential career, and its mission to transmit liberty throughout the world, could not solve the problem that he himself had posed in his earlier address on the "divided destinies" of the nation.¹⁰⁶ The Monument was only a third complete when construction stopped in 1858, and the unfinished stump – which lay untouched throughout the Civil War – gave eloquent testimony to the collapse of Winthrop's visions of national unity and glory. Winthrop himself took refuge in the past, becoming president of the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1855 and hoping to persuade Americans to turn back from the path of disunion by considering their illustrious heritage.

¹⁰⁴ Fox-Genovese and Genovese, 156–59, identify the problem directly: "How could a slaveholding Christian South escape a cycle that begins in glory and ends in decadence and collapse?"

¹⁰⁵ Holt, 470–72, 527, 640–42.

¹⁰⁶ Robert C. Winthrop, *Oration, Pronounced by the Hon. Robert C. Winthrop, On the Fourth of July, 1848, on the Occasion of Laying the Corner-Stone of the National Monument to the Memory of Washington* (Washington: J. & G. S. Gideon, 1848).

In the North and the South during the 1850s, writers looked for a way around the unwelcome conclusion that the nation would be forced by slavery to abandon historical providentialism and to accept disunion. A number of articles in *De Bow's Review* explored the possibility that Americans might find providential purpose in the opening of Asia to Christianity, or in the cultivation of the tropical regions of Central America by an intelligent and well-managed cohort of African slaves.¹⁰⁷ In 1856 the magazine engaged directly with the "the black race in America" and asked the question that seemed to haunt any progressive vision for America or the South: "Why was their introduction permitted?" The article returned to the vision of those two vessels approaching Massachusetts and Virginia, lamenting the tendency of northerners to compare (with "perverted eloquence") the *Mayflower* with that "other ship of evil omen bound for these southern shores." In fact, the "superintending power" had given white settlers the mission of founding a new society in America and had fitted African slaves for the purpose of assisting in this crucial project. Hence the article's emphatic conclusion that "THE SLAVERY OF THE BLACK RACE ON THIS CONTINENT IS THE PRICE AMERICA HAS PAID FOR HER LIBERTY."¹⁰⁸

To prove that this connection was "the key to American history," the *Review* took its readers back to the Atlantic shore in 1620 and imagined a conversation that could have taken place between "two of the better informed of either race" as the Dutch vessel offloaded its first slaves to Virginia. The white participant was unsure about every detail of America's glorious future, but he told his black interlocutor that a "mighty plan" had been devised by God for the foundation of a new empire. The black response was unsurprisingly obliging; the slaves recognized the "great mission" of the whites, knew it to be true in their hearts, and asked not to be admitted to the "higher sphere" that whites inhabited. Both parties agreed that, at some point in the future, blacks might be freed from slavery in Africa or in Central America. But in the meantime, they concurred that slavery would sustain America's progressive destiny, and that neither the "incompetence" nor the resistance of African slaves should be permitted to "thwart . . . the grand scheme in which we are engaged, and on which so much depends."¹⁰⁹

One problem with these visions was that it was hard to produce a slave willing to confirm this convenient ventriloquy. Another was that any projection of slavery in the service of expansionism tended to unsettle northerners, feeding the fear that a "slave power" was plotting to destroy the republic through territorial aggrandizement. Given the reluctance of the federal government in the

¹⁰⁷ W. J. Sasnett, "The United States – Her Past and Her Future," *De Bow's Review* 12, no. 6 (June 1852): 614–31; and "The Destiny of the Slave States," *De Bow's Review* 17, no. 3 (September 1854): 280–84.

¹⁰⁸ "The Black Race in North America; Why Was Their Introduction Permitted?" *De Bow's Review* 20, no. 1 (January 1856): 1–21, at 12–13.

¹⁰⁹ "The Black Race in North America; Why Was Their Introduction Permitted? No. II," *De Bow's Review* 20, no. 2 (February 1856), 190–214, at 204, 205.

1850s to push for further expansion, into Mexico or the Caribbean in particular, a number of private individuals saw opportunities to force Washington's hand by fomenting revolution on an ad hoc basis.¹¹⁰ Antislavery northerners condemned these filibusters as the shock troops of the slave power, sweeping through tropical regions in search of the territory that would produce more slaveholding votes in the U.S. Senate. But southern observers of filibustering were a varied bunch, and at least some of them seem to have believed seriously that the expansion of the Union might help to save it. In a speech to the Senate in 1858, arguing for a U.S. protectorate over Mexico, Sam Houston insisted that the peoples of Mexico would remind Americans of their common ancestry and mission by allowing their northern neighbors to "control and enlighten them."¹¹¹

Antislavery campaigners were right to argue that proslavery sentiments dominated the thinking of many southern advocates of expansion. In the late 1850s, James De Bow gave a platform to George Fitzhugh, the proslavery author and lawyer who published portions of his most famous works in *De Bow's Review*. Fitzhugh used the pages of the magazine to try out ideas that widened the gulf between the North and the South, including the resumption of the Atlantic slave trade and further filibustering expeditions into Latin America. In one extraordinary article in 1858, published soon after William Walker of Tennessee had been removed (again) from the presidency of Nicaragua, Fitzhugh suggested that Mexico might also be seized by American filibusters and that the practice of filibustering had led to Columbus's voyages of discovery, the European expansion into Asia, and even the English settlements in America. (His list of historical filibusters included, somewhat improbably, Moses, Joshua, Alexander the Great, and the prophet Mohammed.)¹¹² While De Bow provided an outlet for these views, neither he nor many other prominent southerners seem to have endorsed them. William Walker himself invited slaveholders to see his brief acquisition of Nicaragua as a providential opportunity to enlarge the circle of southern slavery; at his most inflammatory, Walker suggested that slavery was "not abnormal in American society: it must be the rule, not the exception."¹¹³ De Bow consistently steered the journal away from this bait and came

¹¹⁰ Charles H. Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny: The Lives and Times of the Filibusters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); and Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

¹¹¹ Sam Houston, speech in the U.S. Senate, February 16, 1858, in Williams and Barker, eds., 6: 508–12, at 511.

¹¹² George Fitzhugh, "Acquisition of Mexico – Filibustering," *De Bow's Review* 25, no. 6 (December 1858): 613–26.

¹¹³ William Walker, *The War in Nicaragua* (Mobile: S. H. Goetzel & Co., 1860), 272. Abraham Lincoln was alarmed by George Fitzhugh's apparent endorsement of slavery for white laborers as well as blacks. David Brion Davis has suggested that this (misplaced) fear – that influential southerners hoped to export slavery across the color line – strengthened Lincoln's resolve to confront the South on the eve of the Civil War. Davis, 307–8.

to insist on the need for the South to consolidate its institutions within its current boundaries even after secession and the attack on Fort Sumter.¹¹⁴

While Walker and Fitzhugh hoped to revive a little of the manifest destiny enthusiasm of the 1840s, there was little support for this even in the South.¹¹⁵ Proslavery thinkers clustered around a more restricted vision of the South's past and future, and the drift of their rhetoric was away from aggrandizement either in the service of slavery or as a consequence of a supposedly national mission. James Henry Hammond, who made an unlikely return to the U.S. Senate in 1857, told his South Carolina constituents the following year that the South already had enough territory for a hundred million additional people. In the same speech, he rejected the notion that manifest destiny or geographical determinism made southern secession unthinkable: "The union of these States, from the Canadas to the Rio Grande, and from shore to shore of the two great oceans of the globe, whatever splendor may encircle it, is but a policy and not a principle." By contrast, "the union of the slaveholders of the South is a principle involving all our rights and all our interests." Hammond ominously observed that it was this union of slaveholders that would "be perfect and perpetual," and he was hardly the only southerner to distance himself from the shared history of North and South upon which historical providentialism had long rested.¹¹⁶ Even if southerners could not devise a consistent and effective explanation for the collapse of America's shared destiny, they were ready to acknowledge that this collapse was in process and to blame the people whom they held responsible in the North.

At the end of November 1860, as the South digested the news of Abraham Lincoln's victory, Reverend Benjamin Palmer prepared to address an enormous crowd in the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans. A protégé of James Henley Thornwell, Palmer had risen rapidly through the ranks of the

¹¹⁴ See, for example, James De Bow, "The Progress of the Republic," *De Bow's Review* 7, no. 6 (December 1849): 467–83, at 471; and W. J. Sykes, "Cuba and the United States," *De Bow's Review* 14, no. 1 (January 1853): 63–66. Even in 1861 De Bow refused to countenance seizing Cuba or Mexico for the Confederacy: see "Cuba: The March of Empire and the Course of Trade," *De Bow's Review* 30, no. 1 (January 1861): 30–42; and "Thoughts Suggested by the War: The Past and the Future," *De Bow's Review* 31, no. 3 (September 1861): 296–305.

¹¹⁵ Fitzhugh, 616, tried to rally his readers to the task of invading Mexico by declaring the "filibustering movement" to be "a manifest destiny" for the United States.

¹¹⁶ James Henry Hammond, "Address delivered at Barnwell, South Carolina, October 29, 1858," in *Selections from the Letters and Speeches of the Hon. James H. Hammond, of South Carolina* (New York: John F. Trow & Co., 1866), 323–57, at 356. For an early iteration of this line of thinking, see William Gilmore Simms, *The Sources of American Independence: An Oration, on the Sixty-Ninth Anniversary of American Independence, delivered at Aiken, South-Carolina, before the Town Council and Citizens thereof* (Aiken, S.C.: Published by Council, 1844), 23, 25, 30–31. Simms veered from the script of Independence Day orations by urging his South Carolina audience to imagine the Union as a temporary convenience: "The common cause [of the Revolution] did not make us a common family, and the government which grew out of common concessions, can only be maintained by a continuance of such concessions." *Ibid.*, 31.

Presbyterian Church, and he had left his native South Carolina in 1856 to lead the most important congregation in New Orleans. Watching his parishioners file into church, he would have realized their special predicament in the unfolding political crisis. South Carolina had already seceded, but New Orleans was so dependent on the commerce of the Mississippi River that its people had serious doubts about following Charleston's example. According to the local newspaper, the *New Orleans Delta*, Palmer's church was filled with "many prominent members of all callings and professions," gathered on the annual day of thanksgiving that had been decreed by the outgoing president, James Buchanan. In this atmosphere of uncertainty and excitement, Palmer set about persuading his audience that secession was the proper course to follow.

Slavery, he argued, was a "divine trust" that had been transmitted to the South by God. The "Abolition spirit" had challenged the institution with the "specious cry of reform," influenced by the worst excesses of the French Revolution and by the ungodly idea that "every evil shall be corrected, or society become a wreck." The "mission" of the South was "to conserve and perpetuate the institution of slavery now existing." Southerners had reached "the moment of our destiny," and secession provided the only means by which they could accomplish the task that God had given them. At the end of the service, according to the *Delta's* reporter, there was a "solemn silence" in which every member of the congregation quietly considered what Palmer had said; but soon afterward "the drums beat [and] the bugles sounded; for New Orleans was shouting for secession." The *Delta* reprinted the entire text of Palmer's address three times in the first week of December and still found itself deluged with requests. The newspaper's printing office alone produced 30,000 copies, and the sermon was taken up by other papers and magazines throughout the South.¹¹⁷

Palmer offered this enormous audience clarity on the important question of whether God would approve of secession but – for a proslavery sermon – his formulation of slavery as a "divine trust" was extraordinarily equivocal toward the purpose and future of the institution. He noted that southerners were not obliged to consider whether slavery was the best relation between employers and laborers, or whether the South would continue to rely on slaves "through all time." Such questions left him "baffled," and he advised that the "solution of this intricate social problem" – along with the other "great questions of providence and history" – should be left to divine wisdom rather than the speculation of northerners or southerners. Resting on a deeply conservative base, Palmer's rousing sermon once again reminded southerners of the realities

¹¹⁷ "Slavery a Divine Trust: Duty of the South to Preserve and Perpetuate It, A Sermon Preached in the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans, La., Nov. 29, 1860," in *Fast Day Sermons; or, The Pulpit on the State of our Country* (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1861), 57–80, 68, 69, 62. On the setting and reception of the sermon, see Thomas Carey Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 219–22; and Fox-Genovese and Genovese, 616–18.

and challenges of the “imperfect state of human society” in which both slavery and the Confederacy would be situated.¹¹⁸

The following year, Palmer published a *Vindication of Secession*, which was, in effect, a rebuttal of the writings of Robert J. Breckinridge, a Kentucky Presbyterian who refused to endorse secession.¹¹⁹ Breckinridge was himself a slaveholder and had been a close friend of Palmer’s mentor James Henley Thornwell, but he could not accept that the progressive destiny of the United States should be terminated by secession.¹²⁰ His faith in this destiny sustained him throughout the Civil War, and he became a key lieutenant in Lincoln’s campaign to keep the border states in the Union. In the first months of 1861, Breckinridge complained of the “revolting disregard” shown by secessionists “towards God’s dealings with our country” and maintained that America’s providential career “is not yet accomplished, and must not yet be cut short.” Responding more to the accusations of northern abolitionists than to the reality of proslavery rhetoric, Breckinridge accused the South of disregarding the national mission to spread liberty and instead of seeking to expand slavery across the hemisphere. Breckinridge seemed as ready as any proslavery theorist to accept the necessity of slavery, providing that the United States retained some redemptive power in the fallen world. But it was the South’s reluctance to grant this power to the nation – and the subsequent betrayal of America’s higher purpose by the Confederacy – that led him stridently to declare his support for the Union and, after Fort Sumter, for Lincoln’s war to reestablish it.¹²¹

Palmer angrily set about Breckinridge’s arguments in his *Vindication*, beginning with the suggestion that the South had declared a mission to take slavery anywhere beyond its current boundaries. Palmer would wait upon providence for an indication of slavery’s fate in the future, but he (correctly) denied Breckinridge’s claim that proslavery writers had established the extension of slavery as a national imperative either for the South or for the United States. At the core of his attack was a deep skepticism about what had animated Breckinridge

¹¹⁸ “Slavery a Divine Trust,” 63, 69.

¹¹⁹ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *A Vindication of Secession in the South from the Strictures of Rev. R. J. Breckinridge in the Danville Quarterly Review* (Columbia, S.C.: Southern Guardian Press, 1861).

¹²⁰ Thornwell himself wobbled briefly on the slavery question for precisely this reason. After a trip to Europe in 1860, he worried in a letter to Benjamin Palmer that the United States might “forfeit the noble inheritance to which Providence has called us.” But, unlike Breckinridge, he opted for a proslavery Confederacy rather than a Union of gradual abolition. William W. Freehling, “James Henley Thornwell’s Mysterious Antislavery Moment,” *Journal of Southern History* 57, no. 3 (1991): 383–406, at 401. Thornwell’s moment of uncertainty was registered by Palmer in his *Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974; originally published 1875), 481. Palmer admits that Thornwell “loved the Union with a passion almost rising to idolatry,” but insists that he could no longer sustain this passion given the betrayal of the Constitution by Republicans and antislavery agitators.

¹²¹ Robert J. Breckinridge, *Our Country: Its Peril and Deliverance* (Cincinnati: Office of the Danville Review, 1861), 84; and *The Civil War: Its Nature and End* (Cincinnati: Office of the Danville Review, 1861), 667.

in the first place: a mission for the United States that was so enormous and important that it would consign questions like slavery to a secondary place in political and religious debate. This line of thinking reminded Palmer of the fate of the Roman Empire, and Breckinridge himself was “to all intents an imperialist.” This led Palmer to the unlikely conclusion that, “had there not been an African on this continent,” the North and the South would have been forced to diverge because they had radically different views of the workings and scale of God’s plan for America. The North’s providential presumptuousness led the United States toward empire, whereas the South had the good sense to abandon the national vessel before it was dashed on the rocks of imperial decline. Southerners rejected the fantasy of an aggrandized America with global pretensions and would “put out the long-boat, and separate in time to save and perpetuate those republican principles which are dear to our hearts.” The resulting southern Confederacy was now able to avoid these imperial mistakes. The Confederate States of America would not embark on its own career of providential glory but would act as a lifeboat for southerners who had finally realized the folly and the impiety of America’s supposedly progressive destiny.¹²² Two ships had converged upon America in 1620 bringing slavery and an overzealous reformism to the New World; in 1861 these two elements of the single nation would peacefully diverge in the same way that they had arrived in America, with the South piloting the more modest vessel into an uncertain future.

Robert Winthrop’s retreat into historical study in the 1850s was not quite an abdication from the national crisis. One of his new responsibilities appears to have been directing other scholars to recognize their own responsibilities to historical providentialism. Like Winthrop, George Bancroft had gone to Washington in 1845 with the intention of nudging America forward in its progressive destiny, and he was extremely keen to avoid compromising this objective by debating the place of slavery in the Union. After serving as secretary of the navy and then as the U.S. ambassador to Britain, Bancroft gradually realized that the Union might collapse in the face of the slave controversy. He had already written three volumes of his *History of the United States* before joining Polk’s cabinet, but now he hoped through his books and speeches to persuade Americans that the dictates of historical providentialism were more pressing than the causes of abolition or proslavery. In 1854, at a meeting of the New York Historical Society, Bancroft presented an oration on “the necessity, the reality, and the promise of the progress of the human race.” Bancroft characterized providence as a force for global advancement and made very little reference to America’s special status in the providential scheme. Robert Winthrop rose from the audience to correct the speaker: Bancroft had paid too little attention to the “mighty Union,” which had been “providentially selected” as the stage

¹²² Palmer, *A Vindication of Secession*, 46.

for God's republican experiment. The history of the United States could not be written by a materialist, who denied the role of providence; nor by a Gibbon, whose mind "may deal better with the 'decline and fall of nations.'" ¹²³ Whether Bancroft had already reached this conclusion, or found Winthrop's suggestion to be a useful one, is unclear; but, as his biographer notes, he returned to work on his *History* in the 1850s with a renewed conviction both that the nation had a "providentially assigned course" and that Americans should not deviate from this trajectory. ¹²⁴

During the 1850s, in the face of numerous portents of disaster for the Union, Bancroft was not the only northerner who sought to distract Americans from the sectional controversy by reminding them of their glorious destiny. Fletcher Harper, one of the three Harper brothers who transformed the publishing industry in the United States, turned to historical providentialism to preserve the growing audience for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, which was founded in June 1850 and which achieved extraordinary success in a matter of months. By December of that year, the magazine had built a circulation of 50,000 and was already the most popular publication in America; ten years later, it had doubled this number and had found so many readers throughout the West and South that it could properly be considered a national publication. The success of *Harper's* was based upon its shrewd selection of American and European literature, and the political content was kept at a minimum. In a concession to current affairs, Fletcher Harper carefully commissioned one writer each month to produce an (anonymous) article on a topic of general interest: this feature, the "Editor's Table," was the most widely read piece of social or political commentary in the United States. ¹²⁵

In his history of American magazines, the historian Frank Luther Mott has discussed the delicate position into which *Harper's* was placed by the sectional crisis. Although Fletcher Harper had prepared the "Editor's Table" as a way for his writers to address the issues of the day, the magazine was "anything but a 'journal of opinion,' except when an opinion was almost universally acceptable." ¹²⁶ In the entire decade of the 1850s, *Harper's* made almost no reference to the battles over western territory, the Fugitive Slave Act, and the status of slavery in the capital. Instead, readers of the "Editor's Table" were treated to a succession of pieces that affirmed God's direction of American

¹²³ George Bancroft, *The Necessity, The Reality, and the Promise of the Progress of the Human Race: Oration Delivered before the New York Historical Society, November 20, 1854* (New York: Printed for the Society, 1854). Winthrop's response is printed after Bancroft's address in *ibid.*, 61–65.

¹²⁴ Bancroft's biographer, Lilian Handlin, 256–62, presents his work on the *History of the United States* during the 1850s as a deterrent to radical abolitionists and proslavery disunionists who threatened the integrity of the United States and its providential career. (The quotation is taken from Handlin, "George Bancroft," *American National Biography Online*, www.anb.org, February 2000.)

¹²⁵ On the origins and popularity of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, see Mott, 2: 383–405.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 392.

history and reminded Americans that their past and future pointed to a shared destiny rather than to sectional divergence. One article praised “that great idea of national *continuity*” that carried “the past into the present, and both into the future.”¹²⁷ Another described the process by which the disparate peoples who had settled in America, from the Puritan to the Cavalier, had been “blended all together” by providence to produce a “harmonious result.”¹²⁸ Yet another observed, at the height of the crisis in Kansas, that “from the days of Jamestown and Plymouth Rock until this hour, our countrymen have cherished a deep-seated conviction that we were executing a divine purpose.”¹²⁹ On the few occasions when the magazine was willing to admit to a cloud on the national horizon (one article criticizing filibusters, another attacking abolitionists), the issue of slavery was quickly passed over.¹³⁰ In its place, the editors of *Harper's* stressed the glorious future of the nation and emphasized that this future had been bequeathed to the entire nation by “Puritan, Cavalier, Huguenot, Quaker” and virtually every other white community. “Yes! ‘destiny’ is a word of mighty magic,” observed the “Editor’s Table” in June 1857, but “it is no idle phrase” when used in connection with the nation’s providential career.¹³¹

Even as the nation slid toward the crisis of 1860, *Harper's* did its best to promote an upward trajectory of American development. In October 1858 the “Editor’s Table” featured an article entitled “Providence in American History.” The magazine’s readers were already well acquainted with the theme, but this was the most sustained paean to historical providentialism yet published in *Harper's*. Readers were invited to consider the lives of John Robinson (the Puritan church leader who had guided the Leiden congregation toward their American journey in 1620) and George Washington as evidence of the “providential connections of our career”; and to realize that the distribution of peoples across the eastern seaboard, or at different points in history, merely confirmed the providential unity of the United States. The conclusion of the article – that “the grand idea of the country” was “THE FUTURE” – was taken up by still more articles in the coming months, and Fletcher Harper and his writers cast off the theme only when it was clear that the magazine’s southern subscribers had taken a different view of America’s prospects. Fort Sumter meant the end of national distribution for Fletcher Harper; soon afterward, his magazine established a new reputation for the quality of its war reporting. But before 1861 *Harper's* had thrown its considerable weight behind the Union for the entire decade,

¹²⁷ “Editor’s Table,” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 5, no. 26 (July 1852): 262–65, at 263.

¹²⁸ “Editor’s Table – The True Sources of our National Strength,” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 9, no. 54 (November 1854): 834–38, at 835.

¹²⁹ “Editor’s Table – What Awaits Our Country?” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 10, no. 56 (January 1855): 259–63, at 263.

¹³⁰ On filibustering and abolitionism see, respectively, “Editor’s Table,” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 18, no. 105 (March 1859): 548–56; and “Editor’s Table – The Comitia are at Hand,” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 13, no. 74 (July 1856): 265–69, at 268.

¹³¹ “Editor’s Table – How Ought American Mind to be Cultivated?” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 15, no. 85 (June 1857): 121–25, at 121.

to no avail. Historical providentialism failed to preserve either the magazine's subscription list or the Union itself.¹³²

The Harper brothers found themselves battling not only the likes of James Henry Hammond and Benjamin Palmer but also northern abolitionists who had become inured to the appeals of a progressive destiny precisely because this idea had been used as a diversionary tactic by southerners and doughfaces since at least the 1840s. Meanwhile, the many attacks by proslavery writers on the New England origins of abolitionism seemed only to encourage a regional pride that was, in itself, a form of cultural separatism for many New Englanders. In 1857 Wendell Phillips addressed a "Disunion Convention" that had been organized by the American Anti-Slavery Society in Worcester and boldly announced that he did "not believe history can be made hereafter to bear witness to any high value in the Union." The United States had been, he allowed, "a decent government in its day," until serial concessions to slavery had betrayed its promise. Proposing that Massachusetts secede from the Union, he wished that he "could float her off, and anchor her in mid ocean!" The time had come for American history to double back upon itself, to start again at Plymouth Rock and to "see if we cannot do as much in 236 years as our fathers did – create a great nation out of this wilderness." Phillips's only regret was that the wilderness was no longer empty, which would have allowed history to come full circle and given Americans a second chance to do right by God.¹³³

Not all abolitionists were prepared to give up on the Union, though the anti-slavery community in New England initially regarded the secession of the South as a vindication of its efforts to scourge the United States of slavery. In 1859 John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry created a national sensation, implying the willingness of at least some abolitionists literally to take up arms against slavery and the South. Brown's actions provoked a good deal of criticism within New England as well as elsewhere, but his capture, trial, and execution served as a rallying point for abolitionists for whom the cause of antislavery had previously seemed abstract or impracticable. This supportive rhetoric presented Brown as a New Englander, or even a Puritan, rather than an American. Tracing his family tree through a hero of the American Revolution to a colonist aboard the *Mayflower*, Brown's eulogists sculpted his actions and his lineage into the form of a Puritan warrior – an American Cromwell – rather than a peacemaker.¹³⁴ For abolitionists, Brown implied that the North could vanquish

¹³² "Editor's Table – Providence in American History," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 17, no. 101 (October 1858): 694–700. On the loss of the magazine's southern subscription base after Fort Sumter, see Mott, 2: 392.

¹³³ Wendell Phillips, *Speech at the Worcester Disunion Convention, January 15, 1857* (Boston: American Anti-Slavery Society, n.d. [1857]), 4, 11–12.

¹³⁴ See, for example, James Redpath, *The Public Life of Captain John Brown, with an Autobiography of his Childhood and Youth* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 17, 19, 39, 139; Theodore Parker's letter to an unnamed correspondent, December 24, 1859, reprinted in Redpath, ed., *Echoes of Harper's Ferry* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 88–92; and George B. Cheever's sermon, "The Martyr's Death and the Martyr's Triumph," in *ibid.*, 213–35.

the South and slavery. (It was with good reason that several Virginia newspapers described John Brown as a filibuster.)¹³⁵ Wendell Phillips presented the Harper's Ferry raid as "an invasion by outside power" and compared the failure of Brown's scheme to the abortive New England colonies of Raleigh and Gosnold that had preceded the Pilgrims' arrival in 1620. Whereas Phillips had proposed floating Massachusetts into the Atlantic in 1857 to avoid slavery, he now envisaged subjugating the slave power in the spirit of the "immortal one hundred" who had sailed on the *Mayflower*. Under the guidance of men like John Brown, a new generation of Puritans might found Plymouth Rock not in an independent New England but by a hostile landing on the shores of the South.¹³⁶

Conclusion: "That Great Idea of National Continuity"

In the three decades before the Civil War, many Americans looked for relief from the deepening sectional crisis – and especially the institution of slavery – in the idea that the United States had been specially directed by God toward the political and social redemption of the world. Many people in the North and the South found this progressive destiny more appealing than the prospect of a protracted conflict over slavery, and they attempted to galvanize historical providentialism against national decay or collapse. Manifest destiny was one strategy for achieving this; the ardent and insistent rhetoric of *Harper's Monthly Magazine* during the 1850s was another. None of these attempts succeeded in plotting a providential course around slavery, and so their proponents found themselves confounded or desperate as the Union actually broke apart in the last days of 1860.

Those people who had better prepared for secession and civil war, on the abolitionist or the proslavery side, had tailored providential interpretations to suit the breakup of the United States. For the abolitionists, this meant a wrathful version of judicial providentialism that would destroy the Union or ravage the South, and a willingness to sacrifice a shared history that was contaminated by concessions to the slave power. For proslavery southerners, God had entrusted the South with the mission of conserving and perpetuating slavery until the mists that surrounded the purpose and prospects of this baffling institution finally cleared. The rhetorical overreach of both abolitionists and the northern enthusiasts of historical providentialism like Robert Breckinridge gave southerners every reason to set their sights more modestly, to reef their sails (as Benjamin Palmer put it) and aim at national survival instead of the world's redemption.

¹³⁵ The *New Englander* magazine observed that some Virginia newspapers had (disdainfully) compared Brown's raid with the filibustering expeditions of the 1850s. "The Moral of Harper's Ferry," *New Englander* 17, no. 68 (November 1859): 1066–78.

¹³⁶ Wendell Phillips, lecture delivered in Brooklyn, November 1, 1859, reprinted in Redpath, ed., *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*, 43–66, at 60–61.

This conservative approach also led southern commentators toward judicial providentialism, and they looked to win divine support in the Civil War not through a special providential plan or a glorious history but through the simple cultivation of virtue. Antislavery and proslavery thinkers placed a different emphasis on God's administration of justice, but both sides rejected "that great idea of national continuity" (in the words of *Harper's Magazine*) and a special providential mission for the United States.

In 1861 historical providentialism in America seemed at last to have been undone by the problem of racial diversity that Ezra Stiles had foreseen in 1783. Even those "moderates" of the North and the South who eschewed proslavery or abolitionism had to contend with the fact of secession and the apparently indelible evidence that the thread of divine favor toward the United States had been severed. But behind the dire predictions of the abolitionists was a slender possibility for the reintegration of American history, if the nation could be persuaded at this late stage to support emancipation. Slavery was a national sin of terrible proportions, but some of its fiercest critics were willing to argue that it was the only stain upon America's resplendent career. If North and South were able to accept their shared guilt for perpetuating the slave system, they might be able to remove this stain from American history and envisage an even more prominent role for the United States in God's future plans. This imaginative retrieval of historical providentialism depended upon a government committed to abolition, which was such an unlikely prospect even after the election of 1860 that most abolitionists expected the nation's destruction or permanent dissolution as Lincoln made his way to Washington. The firing on Fort Sumter changed all this, and northerners were quick to realize the possibilities for providential purgation.

The idea that God had a special mission for the United States had inspired the Patriot side during the American Revolution, allowing the colonists to envisage independence in spite of Britain's military power and its defining role in colonial development. Conversely, in the decades after the War of 1812, American politicians and writers promoted a grandiose destiny for the nation as a way of evading the political and social crisis of slavery. During the Civil War, providentialism became a language of political engagement once again. Abolitionists eventually persuaded the northern public that God intended the four million southern slaves to be free and that the brutal conflict between North and South was evidence of his resolve in this matter. Confederate orators struggled to counter this interpretation, and in the years after Appomattox many southerners agreed to embrace it. But while historical providentialism eventually persuaded Americans on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line that God wanted to abolish slavery in the present, it had the effect of insulating the past from serious critique and of limiting God's involvement to emancipation. If the only obstacle to the resumption of America's glorious destiny was slavery, then God could redouble his favors toward the United States regardless of the fate of the freed slaves. The resurgence of providential thinking during the Civil War

undoubtedly helped the United States to abolish slavery, but it also nudged white Americans toward an easy accommodation with inequality, and it spared them an honest reckoning of their earlier behavior. In this sense, the promoters of a special destiny for America traded one form of providential escapism for another in the turbulent years after Lincoln's election.

“The Regenerated Nation”

The Civil War and the Price of Reunion

On January 12, 1861, Senator William Seward of New York pleaded with his southern colleagues to remain in the Union. South Carolina had passed its secession ordinance in December; in the two days before Seward's speech, Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi had followed suit, though their representatives in the U.S. Congress continued to attend the fraught debates as the capital waited for Abraham Lincoln's arrival. "I feel sure that the hour has not come for this great nation to fall," ventured Seward on the Senate floor. "This Union has not yet accomplished what good for mankind was manifestly designed by Him who appoints the seasons." Seward, like the editors of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* or the despairing Robert Winthrop, hoped that the providential mission of the United States would keep the South in the Union. If God had truly ordained a great destiny for America, then the Union could survive even the treason of a few determined separatists: "No, sir," Seward added, "if we were cast down by faction to-day, it would rise again and reappear in all its majestic proportions tomorrow." The senators from Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi, evidently unmoved by this, rose themselves nine days later to make their valedictory addresses to Congress. On the morning of January 21, led by Jefferson Davis, they swept out of the chamber leaving behind a silence that was broken only by gasps and scattered applause. The Union had been dissolved with little regard for its history or for its grand future.¹

This image of southerners' turning their backs upon America's mission is a little misleading. The Civil War produced an extraordinarily pervasive providentialism in the North and the South. From the election of Lincoln in November 1860 until the speeches and sermons that attempted to explain his triumph (and his assassination) in April 1865, public debate was consumed with the question of God's purpose in the war. Confederate and Union propagandists

¹ William Seward, *Congressional Globe*, 36th Cong., 2nd sess. (Senate), January 12, 1861, 344.

arrogated God's approval to their side of the conflict, and the long tradition of national providentialism in America – the tendency to assume, with Seward, that God offered not only protection but historical purpose to the United States – pushed northern and southern writers into more pointed and specific investigations of the divine will. Did God mean to punish the United States for impieties and crimes that had previously eluded its providential boosters? Was the Confederacy an instrument for preserving slavery permanently or for preparing blacks for the work of renovating Africa in the future? Could one trace the course of God's favor simply in the dispatches from the front, by measuring the ground that had been captured or the lives that had been lost on the battlefield, or was there a subtlety to the divine plan that rewarded patience and humility?

Ministers, politicians, newspaper editors, and writers from all walks of life pursued these questions doggedly on both sides of the sectional divide, producing a cacophony of providential speculation that must have overwhelmed anxious Americans amid a war of unprecedented destructiveness. The task of making sense of God's purposes was complicated by each side's inheritance of a particularly difficult problem from the circumstances of secession. The South could at least claim to have seized the providential initiative and to have acted boldly in the disputatious weeks surrounding Lincoln's election. But slavery was, as we have seen, an awkward foundation on which to ground a sense of national purpose or providential mission, not least because much of the rest of the world appeared united against the institution. In the North, on the other hand, the most obvious explanation for what had happened – that God had punished the nation for its dependence upon slavery – was ideologically inconvenient and politically dangerous. This bleak iteration of judicial providentialism had been championed since the 1820s by free blacks and by reviled white abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison, precisely those blamed by Unionists for driving the South out of the United States. An insistence that God would punish the nation for slavery was anathema to Lincoln's painstaking strategy for preserving the Union. Before the firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861, Lincoln still hoped to reconstruct the country through guaranteeing slavery where it existed. Even when the Confederates had rejected his entreaties, the decision of four slave states in the upper South to remain within the Union made Lincoln a closet abolitionist at best.

The search for a viable form of national providentialism during the Civil War was consequently beset by difficulties. For the Confederacy, condemned to seek a divine purpose amid calamitous defeats, this search ended in despair. Northerners – led by Abraham Lincoln himself – eventually seized on an interpretation of God's will that not only made sense of the Civil War but succeeded in repairing the breach in American history. The abolitionists had been arguing for thirty years that God would punish the United States for slavery, and they intensified this attack in the first eighteen months of the war as northern Republicans dithered on the issue of emancipation. In 1862 Lincoln accepted the premises of the abolitionist argument – that God had humbled America for

its national sin – but he refused to give up the idea that the United States had been favored by God since its colonial beginnings, or to abandon the conviction that America would play a central role in the providential improvement of the world. The result was an understanding of American history and promise that owed much more to historical than judicial providentialism. Lincoln rejected the idea that nations simply rose and fell in God's estimation, and he clung to the belief that providence had special plans for America. This rehabilitation of historical providentialism helped Lincoln to popularize emancipation, in a way that the wrathful visions of the abolitionists could not. But it also treated the end of slavery as a providential event, rather than a moral revolution in American thinking. This had unfortunate consequences for blacks themselves, who had no place in the providential scheme after emancipation. It also discouraged whites from recognizing the injustice of slavery in America's past.

Historians have noted that Lincoln and other antislavery leaders in the 1860s were unable to accept racial equality even as they embraced emancipation and that a pervasive racism undermined the prospects of African Americans in the South and the North after 1865. This racism was protected, perhaps even encouraged by historical providentialism, because these revived ideas about America's special purpose in history drowned out the doubts of the abolitionists about the dubious foundations of American society. Following Lincoln's lead, northern writers and orators insisted during the war that the United States was providentially integral, that it was still pursuing an upward trajectory in history, and that the nation could be purified if it removed the single stain of slavery. Thus Americans were invited both to remember a familiar story about their special mission and to disregard those things – events, arguments, even people – that could not be fitted into the providential scheme.²

I. “What Is to Be the Mission of This Nation?”: God and the Confederacy

Two weeks into the war, the *Chicago Tribune* – a strong supporter of the Republican cause – ran a short feature on the providential confidence of the South. The new vice-president of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens of Georgia, had claimed that God would support the South in its struggle for independence. The *Tribune* noted, a little warily, Stephens's “easy familiarity with God,” before

² The historiography on the providential purpose of the war in the North has been dominated by James H. Moorhead, *American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860–1869* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), which holds that northerners saw the Civil War as a means of hastening the millennium. Some northerners did discuss the millennium in sermons and speeches during the war (though many – including Frederick Douglass – did so in figurative terms), but it would be misleading to suggest that northern rhetoric generally expressed the belief that the literal fulfillment of the book of Revelation was in progress. Instead, northerners more often drew upon the vaguer tenets of historical providentialism – asserting a progressive destiny for the United States in world history but without any special reference to the eschatological specifics of Revelation.

assuring its readers that he was “as prophetic and confident as one of Ahab’s four hundred lying prophets.”³ Northern observers masked their nervousness with satire – the *Tribune* article concluded with the claim of one Memphis newspaper that “Providence must have provided, at the foundation of the world, the hills on the river a few miles north of that place for a batter to overhaul Northern steamboats.” Behind this bravado lurked a trepidation in the North about the South’s serene appeals to God. Southern politicians like Stephens joined ministers from every denomination in emphasizing God’s control over human affairs, and leading journals like the *Southern Literary Messenger* provided a forum for discussion of the precise direction of God’s plan. The Confederate Congress, meeting to formulate a new constitution, made a great fanfare of one obvious revision to the U.S. prototype: unlike the federal Constitution, the Confederacy’s founding document would explicitly acknowledge God’s overruling providence and the nation’s dependence upon his direction.⁴

This may seem like an arcane or fussy adjustment, but it occasioned as much commentary from southerners as the constitutional guarantees given to slavery. A number of Confederate clergymen blamed the entire Civil War upon this “important defect” in the work of the Founders. One Alabama minister was appalled to note Alexander Hamilton’s excuse for this omission: that the delegates at Philadelphia “entirely forgot” about providence. (No wonder, he fumed, that the nation had come to nothing: “Can it be, that for this prevalent forgetfulness of God, the Nation, under Providence, has been so terribly rent asunder?”) In addition to supplying this defect, southern ministers and politicians looked to define a role for the new Confederacy in human history, a place in the divine scheme that would explain and acknowledge the secession crisis and set the South on an independent course.⁵

Two addresses from the first half of 1861 exemplify the possibilities for this southern national providentialism. Benjamin Palmer, the Presbyterian minister who had galvanized New Orleans for secession in December 1860, preached another sermon in June 1861 that itemized America’s mistakes and upheld a sad fact of providential theory: nations are preserved only “till their work is done, after which they sink into decrepitude.” The United States had, through a

³ “Confederate Divinity,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 2, 1861, 2.

⁴ Harry S. Stout discusses the Confederate Constitution in “The American Jeremiad Divided against Itself,” 2005 Lyman Beecher Lectures, Yale Divinity School. On the effects of the war on Confederate Christianity, see Daniel W. Stowell, *Rebuilding Zion: The Religious Reconstruction of the South, 1863–1877* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1–48; and Kurt O. Berends, “Confederate Sacrifice and the ‘Redemption’ of the South,” in Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald B. Matthews, eds., *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 99–123.

⁵ Ferdinand Jacobs, *A Sermon for the Times, Preached in Fairview Presbyterian Church, Perry County, Alabama, On Thursday, June 13, 1861* (n.p., n.d.), 3. See also C. S. Vedder, “Offer Unto God Thanksgiving,” *A Sermon Delivered in the Summerville Presbyterian Church, on Sunday, July 28, 1861* (Charleston: Evans & Cogwell, 1861), 9; and Stephen Elliott, *New Wine Not to be Put into Old Bottles: A Sermon Preached in Christ Church, Savannah, On Friday, February 28th, 1862* (Savannah: John M. Cooper & Co., 1862), 16.

series of these national mistakes, forfeited its role as a favored nation. (First on Palmer's list was the omission of God from the Constitution.) The Confederacy might thus be permitted by God to take over the destiny that had originally been assigned to the nation as a whole.⁶ Alexander Stephens, addressing a packed Athenaeum in Savannah in March 1861, offered an alternative vision of national purpose. Stephens's speech, which quickly achieved notoriety in the North, insisted that racial differences were "the works of Providence" and that they provided not only an organizing principle for southern society but an opportunity to demonstrate the providential truth of racial hierarchy to a skeptical world. The Confederate States of America, according to Stephens, would be "the first government ever instituted upon the principles in strict conformity to nature, and the ordination of Providence, in furnishing the materials of human society." Racial inequality was to be the "corner-stone" of the Confederacy.⁷

These two templates encouraged providential interpreters in the South, while leaving important questions unanswered. If, as Benjamin Palmer suggested, the United States had been leveled by God for its sins, could the Confederacy inherit its mantle with the confidence that it would avoid these mistakes? As he spoke of the rise and fall of nations, promising that "dissolution must come" in every national career, Palmer offered little hope of a distinctive or progressive role for the Confederacy. The South could take its place in a scheme of judicial providentialism, but it should forswear the northern vanity of a special role for America in history. Alexander Stephens's belief in the providential mission of slavery also created difficulties for the southern ministers who looked to expand upon it in the following months. How could the Confederacy claim a mission to spread the principles of subjugation when world opinion was nearly unanimously opposed to slavery? "We have a great lesson to teach the world with respect to the relation of races," declared James Warley Miles of South Carolina in March 1863: "that certain races are permanently inferior in their capacities to others."⁸ Even in a nineteenth century that had already undermined the modest universalism of the Enlightenment, it would be hard to preach the good news of racial inequality with this degree of gusto (especially when it was applied to the institution of slavery rather than the more subtle instruments of

⁶ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, "National Responsibility Before God," in David B. Chesebrough, ed., *God Ordained This War: Sermons on the Sectional Crisis, 1830-1865* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 201-20, at 204-5.

⁷ Alexander Stephens, "Speech Delivered on the 21st of March, 1861, in Savannah, known as 'The Corner Stone Speech,' Reported in the Savannah Republican," in Henry Cleveland, ed., *Alexander H. Stephens, in Public and Private, With Letters and Speeches Before, During, and Since the War* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1866), 717-29, at 722.

⁸ James Warley Miles, *God in History: A Discourse Delivered Before the Graduating Class of the College of Charleston, on Sunday Evening, March 29, 1863* (Charleston: Evans & Cogswell, 1863), 26. Michael O'Brien discusses Miles's views of theology and slavery in *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2: 1098-1114. See also Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 585-95.

colonial subjugation). Little wonder that some southerners referred to the very isolation of the South on the world stage as itself designed by God to ensure an eye-catching vindication for the southern social system. According to Isaac Tichenor of Alabama, providence had prevented the Confederacy from forging “entangling alliances” with Europe so that only the South (and God himself) would receive credit for slavery’s triumph.⁹

The Confederacy’s pursuit of providential self-knowledge was hardly straightforward or single-minded even before the crushing defeats of the war’s last years. But the profuse readings and speculations surrounding God’s will typically confronted one or both of these major obstacles to a southern national providentialism. Could the South simply inherit the mantle of the United States, in full awareness of the sorry outcome of America’s career? And was the institution of slavery a durable basis for a Confederate mission in history? South Carolina preacher John Wightman maintained in 1861 that “we must search the history of present events for the place and mission of the South,” and his fellow citizens found a good deal to inspire them in the exciting developments of the war’s first phase.¹⁰ Union forces were embarrassed on several fronts during the summer, and the Confederate victory at the first Battle of Bull Run in July 1861 sent a surge of confidence throughout the South. A number of clergymen offered pocket versions of historical providentialism fitted for the extremely brief career of the Confederacy: “Look all the way back through our young history,” declared the bishop of Georgia, Stephen Elliott, in a thanksgiving sermon after Manassas, “and see how His power has shielded us, his wisdom directed us, His spirit harmonized us.” In the fall of 1861, the events since Lincoln’s election offered enough evidence for some southerners to plot a progressive course for the South toward a secure and purposive independence.¹¹

Elliott himself erected a more expansive vision of national purpose upon these early victories. In one especially bold sermon in 1862, he described a historical providentialism that favored slavery rather than the United States. Blacks had originally come to America as an “act of mercy” to end the suffering of Indian laborers. When the slave trade had been proscribed by moral scruples at the end of the eighteenth century, God inspired slaveholders to treat their slaves more kindly and thus ensured their survival and increase. (Meanwhile, the “very scanty profits” from rice and indigo at this time, which threatened

⁹ Isaac Taylor Tichenor, *Fast-Day Sermon, Delivered before the General Assembly of the State of Alabama, August 21, 1863* (Montgomery: Montgomery Advertiser Book and Job Printing Office, 1863), 13.

¹⁰ John T. Wightman, *The Glory of God, the Defence of the South: A Discourse Delivered in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Yorkville, S.C., July 28th, 1861, the Day of National Thanksgiving for the Victory at Manassas* (Charleston: Evans & Cogswell, 1861), 6.

¹¹ Stephen Elliott, *God’s Presence with our Army at Manassas! A Sermon, Preached in Christ Church, Savannah, on Sunday, July 28th* (Savannah: W. Thorne Williams, 1861), 21. See also J. C. Mitchell, *A Sermon Delivered in the Government Street Church, on the National Fast, June 13, 1861* (Mobile: Farrow & Dennett, 1861), 19.

the commercial survival of slavery, were supplanted by the providential introduction of cotton.) Elliott went on and on, piloting the history of slavery past abolitionism, West Indian emancipation, and the secession crisis, arguing that "God protected it at every point." Now the Confederacy had a "trust from God" to maintain and develop this institution into the future, reassured by the fact that he had always protected it in the past.¹²

The attention to detail in Elliott's sermon was unusual, but the idea of a progressive destiny for slavery was taken up by other voices during the war and was not limited to the pulpit. *De Bow's Review* published a similar argument in January 1862 that, in keeping with the magazine's focus on matters of commerce and political economy, tweaked the emphasis of a southern providential mission. God had protected slavery since the founding settlements, argued the *Review*, and he had passed on "an important and peculiar trust" to the Confederacy. Slavery was an indirect instrument for the world's salvation: slaves produced cotton, cotton was the engine of commerce, and commerce ensured the spread of civilization and religion throughout the world. The Confederate States "are to be the first and greatest of civilized nations" and "a people chosen in the providence of God" because their slaves would sustain "that commerce which is, as it were, the wings upon which He sends His gospel to heathen nations."¹³

Proslavery theorists had long argued that the South had done more for Africa than all the philanthropic efforts of Europe and the northern states. Northern and European onlookers remained unconvinced.¹⁴ Confederate orators consequently supplied a new rationale for slavery that insisted that the institution had protected African Americans from another harsh law of providence: inferior races would inevitably die out if forced to live alongside whites (a lesson that had been soberly demonstrated by the tragic fate of America's indigenous population). Southern commentators advanced this with a lachrymose sincerity that seems implausible to our eyes. Benjamin Palmer, taking for granted the fact that blacks would meet "annihilation" if they were freed from slavery, confessed to an audience in 1863 that he would be "at a loss to understand

¹² Stephen Elliott, *Our Cause in Harmony with the Purposes of God in Christ Jesus: A Sermon Preached in Christ Church, Savannah, On Thursday, September 18th, 1862* (Savannah: John M. Cooper, 1862), 11–13.

¹³ "Commercial Importance and Future of the South," *De Bow's Review* 31, nos. 1 and 2 (January–February 1862): 120–34, at 133, 134. Stephen Elliott himself was not entirely averse to this idea, arguing in 1862 that slaves produced the cotton on which the rest of the world depended, and therefore served humanity more generally: *Our Cause*, 15. The *Atlanta Register* published a special essay with a similar theme in 1864: *Address of the Atlanta Register to the People of the Confederate States* (Atlanta: Atlanta Register Office, [1864]).

¹⁴ See, for instance, the despairing *Address to Christians Throughout the World, by the Clergy of the Confederate States of America* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1863). Hoping to win the support of clergy in Europe, an extremely diverse and wide-ranging group of southern ministers signed a statement intended to persuade their European counterparts that the Emancipation Proclamation was sinful, and that abolitionism was "an interference with the plans of Divine Providence."

the meaning of that Providence which brought [Africans] to our shores" if they were permitted to expire in this way.¹⁵ The association between emancipation and extinction was advanced by leading clergymen like Palmer and Elliott, as well as magazines like the *Southern Literary Messenger*.¹⁶

One useful summary of this thinking came in an anonymous pamphlet published in the fall of 1861 in New Orleans, entitled *Providential Aspect and Salutary Tendency of the Existing Crisis*. The pamphlet, which was extensively distributed throughout the Confederacy in the winter of 1861–62, identified the four "momentous results" for which God had designed slavery: it encouraged the "partial civilization" of blacks, who would otherwise spend a lifetime in Africa in "utter and stationary barbarism"; it gave jobs and income to millions of white people involved in the cotton trade; it provided the fabric and clothing upon which "a large majority of the human family" had come to depend; and it supplied the Confederacy with "an irresistible weapon, more potent than armies, navies, and treasures combined, to sustain the independence they have achieved." Slavery would allow the Confederate States to "perpetuat[e] the glorious institutions founded by Washington and his compatriots, and which, in the fag-end of the late United States, have already been superseded by a Military Despotism." In its conclusion, the pamphlet insisted that "the events which I have enumerated, and a multitude of others, . . . constitute a symmetrical chain, constructed by the Great Ruler for the purpose of qualifying our Republic to confront and subdue the combined obstacles now obstructing the luminous paths to its sublime destiny." In place of the miniature visions of historical providentialism offered by some of the war's earliest commentators, which tried to harness the whirlwind of developments since Lincoln's election, the *Providential Aspect* offered an expansive mission for the Confederacy. The South would influence the destiny of continents, unite commerce and benevolence, and salvage the glorious career that the United States had scuttled.¹⁷

Samuel Cartwright of New Orleans, the pioneering racial theorist who had long argued that God intended blacks for servitude, lauded the *Providential Aspect* in the pages of *De Bow's Review*. The pamphlet was "abounding with highly

¹⁵ *Sermons of Bishop Pierce and Rev. B. M. Palmer, Delivered before the General Assembly at Milledgeville, GA., on Fast Day, March 27, 1863* (Milledgeville: Boughton, Nisbet & Barnes, 1863), 37.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Miles, 17; Benjamin M. Palmer, *A Discourse Before the General Assembly of South Carolina, On December 10, 1863, Appointed by the Legislature as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer* (Columbia: Charles P. Pelham, 1864), 15–16; and William Henry Holcombe, "The Alternative: A Separate Nationality, or the Africanization of the South," *Southern Literary Messenger* 32, no. 2 (February 1861): 81–88, at 82. Stephen Elliott put the point most succinctly in 1864: "The black race perishes with its freedom." Elliott, "Vain is the Help of Man": *A Sermon Preached in Christ Church, Savannah, On Thursday, September 15, 1864* (Macon: Burke, Boykin & Company, 1864), 8.

¹⁷ *Providential Aspect and Salutary Tendency of the Existing Crisis* (New Orleans: Picayune Office, 1861), 13, 26.

important facts," he noted, while regretting that the disruption to southern printing presses and mails might limit its distribution.¹⁸ But the *Providential Aspect* created as many problems as it solved for those who would devise or embrace a historical providentialism for the Confederacy. Paeans to the "glorious institutions of Washington" aligned the revolution of 1861 with the events of 1776, and southerners struggled with their own selective embrace of Revolutionary history.

The federal Constitution, as we have seen, contained a fatal defect in its failure to acknowledge God. The other great document of the founding era, the Declaration of Independence, was also an awkward inheritance. In his "Corner-Stone" speech, Alexander Stephens bluntly proclaimed that the Founders had been "fundamentally wrong" to believe that slavery would eventually die out or that the races were equal: Stephens inverted the Declaration of Independence by insisting that all men were not created equal and boasted that the Confederacy had the courage to abide by this providential truth.¹⁹ A train of Confederate revisionism followed his lead, insisting that the Founders were "tinctured" by the French Revolution, or that the Declaration was a "pernicious doctrine."²⁰ George Fitzhugh, who was willing to tackle the most tormented questions of racial theory or social policy in the 1850s and 1860s, told the readers of the *Southern Literary Messenger* that the American Revolution had actually been an "exceedingly vulgar, common place affair," with "nothing poetic or dramatic about it." Colonies, like children, inevitably grew up and left their parents, and so this was an "exceedingly natural and conservative revolution" rather than a world-changing event. The Declaration of Independence, with its more inflated assessment of the Patriot cause, was filled with "bombastic absurdities [that] had about as much to do with the occasion, as would a sermon or an oration on the teething of a child or the kitting of a cat." Fitzhugh, and many other revisionists, could find little reason to attach the South's destiny to past events that were alternately mundane or destructive.²¹

Similarly, a national providentialism built around perpetuating slavery had to contend with two prevailing doubts that we encountered in the preceding chapter. While most southerners were prepared to accept that God had permitted slavery in America, many were unconvinced about its perpetuity.²²

¹⁸ "The Existing Crisis," *De Bow's Review* 31, nos. 1 and 2 (January–February 1862): 109–13.

¹⁹ Stephens, 721.

²⁰ Palmer, "National Responsibility," 208; Frank Alfriend, "A Southern Republic and a Northern Democracy," *Southern Literary Messenger* 37, no. 5 (May 1863): 283–90, at 286.

²¹ George Fitzhugh, "The Revolutions of 1776 and 1861 Contrasted," *Southern Literary Messenger* 37, no. 12 (December 1863): 718–26, at 718, 722, 719. O'Brien presents Fitzhugh as a "Burkean intellectual" in *Conjectures of Order* 2: 971–91, at 987.

²² Given the difficulties of many southerners in plotting a providential future for slavery, the momentary flirtation of even James Henley Thornwell with gradual abolition on the eve of the Civil War is perhaps less surprising than it first appears. For contrasting views on this question, see William W. Freehling, "James Henley Thornwell's Mysterious Antislavery Moment," *Journal of Southern History* 57, no. 3 (1991): 383–406; and O'Brien, 2: 1156–57.

This anxiety was a prerequisite for those who spoke of slavery as an instrument for the renovation of Africa, because these visions usually implied a mass “return” of American blacks in the near or distant future. But even those who defended the providential status of slavery without reference to Africa’s prospects were wary of plotting God’s intentions too far ahead.²³ The other doubt that tugged at Confederates concerned the very idea of progress that animated historical providentialism in the North. Numerous southern observers identified this idea in the hated triumvirate of Puritanism, Jacobinism, and abolitionism that had pushed the South into secession. An anonymous pamphlet from Virginia in 1862 noted that northern reformers had “pompously paraded” a slew of “philanthropic schemes,” ranging from Sunday schools to abolitionist societies, in defiance of a providential status quo. The threat of these “fanatical organizations” forced the pamphleteer into a striking claim: that, “for upwards of 1800 years,” the “philanthropy of the Christian world has been actively exerted to accomplish, what? We answer, comparatively nothing.”²⁴ Confederates were less likely to define a mission of global redemption for their new nation than to defend the virtue of existing institutions and to deny the efficacy of social improvement. This conservative commitment, warped by slavery, culminated in a curiously passive piety. Hence, the unusual argument was advanced by a variety of Confederate thinkers that the duty of the South was not to help the rest of humanity to realize God’s plan but to defend God himself (and his providence) from humanity’s nearsighted meddling with the social and political order he had arranged. “We are summoned to stand as sentinels around Jehovah’s throne,” Benjamin Palmer informed the Georgia legislature in March 1863.²⁵

In tracing the cat’s cradle of conviction and aversion from which a Confederate providentialism took shape after Lincoln’s victory, we should remember that some Confederates looked at the United States without envy or the desire to hijack its destiny. One of these was Calvin Wiley, a lawyer and newspaper editor who had become a leading figure in promoting public education in his home state of North Carolina in the 1850s.²⁶ (In 1852, he had also written one

²³ The apparent incompatibility of slavery with the millennium gave pause to some commentators, though one magazine article in December 1861 suggested that blacks might enjoy a “brighter future” during that happy period without actually “tread[ing] the same path which the Caucasian has trod in the course of his development.” (In this vision, blacks are given a position as moral mascots, while whites dominate the science, philosophy, and politics of the putative golden era.) William Henry Holcombe, “Characteristics and Capabilities of the Negro Race,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 33, no. 6 (December 1861): 401–10, at 408.

²⁴ Analytica, *The Problem of Government, in the Light of the Past, Present and the Future* (Richmond: Published by the Author, 1862), 12–13.

²⁵ See, for example, the *Sermons of Bishop Pierce and Rev. B. M. Palmer*, 39. Pierce made a similar argument in his fast-day address on the same day: *ibid.*, 5–6. See also J. Jones, *The Southern Soldier’s Duty: A Discourse Delivered to the Rome Light Guards and Miller Rifles, in the Presbyterian Church of Rome, GA, on Sabbath Morning, the 26th of May, 1861* (Rome: D. H. Mason, 1861), 11.

²⁶ O’Brien, 1: 346–50, discusses Wiley’s campaigns for public education.

of the many angry southern responses to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.)²⁷ In the middle of the Civil War, Wiley found time amid his duties as the state's superintendent for education to produce a 213-page book entitled *Scriptural Views of National Trials*. Having established that every nation was connected with the "grand, consistent course of Divine Providence," and that his countrymen were particularly enjoined to seek providential counsel in these dark days, he produced a list of national sins for which both North and South were now being punished. The first of these sins was the tendency of Americans to argue that "the United States are the hope of the World" and to forget that their dependence upon God had been absolute. Americans had overreached, not least in deifying their history rather than the God who directed it: "American history was a great Pantheistic Temple where incense was daily burned at a thousand idol shrines," observed Wiley of the antebellum period. God had seen this, and had left the United States to its own devices for just long enough to demonstrate an eternal truth about humanity: "Man in his natural state, is the same depraved creature everywhere, with evil and downward instincts." Lamenting the "idolatry of self" that had reassured Americans that they were inherently virtuous and destined for greatness, Wiley advised his fellow Confederates to strike down their own monuments and statues and to write, "in every niche, once dedicated to the image of creatures, 'God only is great – man is vile.'" ²⁸

Wiley was an eccentric. Elsewhere in the book, as he searched for further reasons to explain the spectacular destruction of the United States, he suggested that the constant complaints of Americans that the weather was "too cold or too hot" had also pushed God into his brief and catastrophic disappearing act. But Wiley had a sharp eye for the hypocritical or self-serving dimensions of American historical providentialism, and his frustrations emerge with unusual force in the pages of this book. He offered a sustained attack on American imperialism, deploring the fact that the United States "was a great, swaggering bully in the streets of the world, ready to take offence on the slightest grounds, and seeking pretexts for quarrels with those of inferior strength." Manifest destiny was a particular target of his wrath: "To cover its greedy aims," he observed of the nation, "it sanctified its lust under the blasphemous assumption of a manifest destiny to live, extend and rule: thus claiming that the Providence of God was but the nurse and prop of its ambition, and that the Divine counsels could not do otherwise than bend to its interests." We might be tempted simply to dismiss this as Confederate bombast, but Wiley was careful to stress that southerners bore equal responsibility for the crimes of the United States. (Abraham Lincoln, as we will see, performed a reciprocal gesture in his second inaugural address.) Strikingly, Wiley was also adamant that, among the "sins of the

²⁷ Calvin H. Wiley, *Life in the South: A Companion to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1852).

²⁸ Wiley, *Scriptural Views of National Trials or, The True Road to The Independence and Peace of the Confederate States of America* (Greensboro, N.C.: Sterling, Campbell & Albright, 1863), 16, 172, 173, 178.

Confederate States,” an honest observer would have to list proslavery theory and the violence of masters. Wiley was not an abolitionist, and he advanced the convenient argument that the relatively small number of blacks who had fled to Union lines from Confederate plantations indicated God’s approval for the institution. But he regretted the intellectual fundamentalism that had led clergymen to promote slavery as a positive good and to ignore the work both of Christianizing slaves and pressuring their masters to improve their living conditions.²⁹

Wiley is significant for two reasons. First, he represents a southern aversion to the idiom and effects of historical providentialism in the United States, which should check our instinct to present southern versions of national providentialism as merely facsimiles or corruptions of American archetypes. Wiley evidently had no stomach for a southern manifest destiny that, like its northern counterpart, could “place the whole country above all systems of ethics and above those inexorable rules of moral right by which all other nations had to stand or fall.” (He was equally appalled by the logic of democracy, which presented majority rule as “the fiat of fate, and the standard of all political justice.”) But Wiley’s book also suggests the appeal of localism over nationalism to many southerners, a desire to escape from the “universal control” of the United States and to contemplate one’s purpose in the comfort and familiarity of one’s immediate surroundings.³⁰ This is hardly the rock on which to build a romantic view of an anti-imperialist South, liberated from the tunnel vision of historical providentialism and free to choose ethics and principles rather than the dictates of destiny.³¹ White southerners eventually secured their localism in spite of Appomattox, and for nearly a century they used this privilege to rivet the system of racial discrimination that the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments were supposed to destroy. Wiley reminds us, though, of an important fact about the providential mission of the Confederacy: at least some southerners had no interest in acquiring one.

And for the rest, the war’s later years were extraordinarily difficult. James Henley Thornwell, the proslavery minister who directed the Theological Seminary at Columbia, prepared a pamphlet in the winter of 1861–62 to be distributed to Confederate soldiers and civilians. In the manuscript draft, Thornwell

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 184, 179, 180, 187–200.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 181, 184. O’Brien, 1: 349–50, notes that Wiley was “frankly xenophobic,” and that he probably included Virginians and South Carolinians in his definition of “foreigners.”

³¹ Fox-Genovese and Genovese, 224, offer a version of this romanticism: “By minimizing the suffering of their black slaves, [white southerners] defended slavery at home all the more passionately while they struggled in the United States against an imperialist worldview that would subsequently impose unprecedented misery and mass slaughter on the world. The defeat of the slaveholders and their worldview opened the floodgates to the global catastrophe their leading spokesmen had long seen a-borning.” The suggestion that white southerners had embraced a conservatism that was misguided about blacks but prescient about American imperialism surely overstates the case, and Fox-Genovese and Genovese themselves present a more nuanced picture at 215–20.

had written “the crisis! the crisis!” at the top of almost every page; the tract explained the South’s military defeats (presumably in the Sea Islands and in Tennessee) without abandoning faith in a benevolent and controlling God. “No nation ever yet achieved anything great,” Thornwell reminded his anxious readers, “that did not regard itself as the instrument of Providence.” A careful survey of recent events, and of providential theory, provided three explanations for Confederate defeats. God might be punishing the South for its lapses in virtue or piety – a simple iteration of judicial providentialism. He might also intend that a chosen people should endure special trials to prepare them for their mission. Nations were “under the pupilage of Providence,” Thornwell argued, and “may be the instruments of furthering the progress of the human race.” But to qualify for the role, God might decide to test their mettle.³² This broader understanding of the South’s providential role was appealing to many Confederate orators, who could reach backward for a compelling biblical example (the Israelites in Egypt) and could convert the isolation of the Confederacy into a blessing.³³

Thornwell’s final explanation for military reverses was the most straightforward but also the most troubling: God’s purposes were not always clear to mortal observers. “The whole end of Providence,” Thornwell warned, “it were presumptuous for any one, independently of a special revelation, to venture to decipher.”³⁴ This point could be made more or less hopefully. In 1863 Stephen Elliott of Georgia revised his confident predictions of the previous year, acknowledging that the Confederacy had failed to convert Europe’s reliance on southern cotton into diplomatic recognition. (Generously, Elliott suggested that the failure of this scheme indicated that God “does not permit any one nation to hold in its hand the fate, or even the destiny of other nations.”) Lincoln had expanded his war aim to emancipation and had gathered “forces almost unprecedented in modern history” to subjugate the South, but Elliott maintained that God supported the Confederacy and would vindicate its cause. It was simply a matter of timing. “We may understand what is the coming event which is to be evolved from the curtained future, but we cannot always reckon the time which that event will consume in its complete development.” This was an old stoical trick, which was applied to Christian providentialism by the Roman philosopher Boethius as early as the sixth century.³⁵ Because God experienced time in a radically different way to humans and lived in all moments simultaneously, it was foolish for mortals to protest at the injustice of their

³² James Henley Thornwell, “Our Danger and Our Duty,” in Benjamin M. Palmer, ed., *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974; originally published 1875), 581–90, at 586. Benjamin Palmer discusses the circumstances of the pamphlet’s publication and distribution at 513.

³³ T. J. Chambers, *To the People of Texas* ([Austin], [1863]); and Tichenor, 13.

³⁴ Thornwell, 588.

³⁵ Fox-Genovese and Genovese, 325–26, 725, discuss the popularity of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* in the South, and suggest that it “taught a hard lesson that strengthened Southerners during the War.”

situation or to lament the times in which they lived. But this also meant that justice might not come quickly enough for the Confederacy. Surely Elliott's audience in 1863 was not much comforted by his observation that "the Israelites were kept forty years in the wilderness."³⁶

The idea that providence was hard to decipher, or that earthly success gave no clue to God's underlying intentions, appealed to numerous Confederate ministers and orators as the war dragged on. Isaac Tichenor, addressing the Alabama State legislature on the national fast day in August 1863, admitted that some southerners had started to "sneer" at providential interpretations and to observe mordantly that "Providence always favors the heavy battalions." This could hardly be true, Tichenor countered, if one considered the history of the American Revolution, or the military successes of the Confederacy's first year.³⁷ Others went further. In December 1863, in a fast-day address to the Georgia legislature, Samuel H. Higgins produced Napoleon to argue that military success was no indication of providential approval: "While I admit that success in war often carries with it the manifest tokens of a divine *interposition*, I am not so sure about the *favor*." God permitted Napoleon to ravage Europe for its sins and then enabled his personal downfall. But what did this story mean for the future of the South? Higgins was strikingly honest in his answer:

What is to be the mission of this nation, I know not – what new and higher civilization will be developed out of the wreck of the old, I know not – what great Providential plan, or scheme, or purpose, will be answered by the severance of late political affiliations, I know not – what may yet lie in the background of this wonderful scheme, I know not; but that out of the waters of this bloody baptism, our country will come forth not only politically, but morally redeemed and disenthralled, I do not for a moment question. . . . This then is our refuge and strength. And so real and abiding is the comfort derived from this view of Providential agency and control, that I pity from my heart the wretchedness of the atheism that sees nothing in the great changes that are going on, but the operation of secondary causes – nothing but the low water-mark of political expediency – nothing but the shifting tides and the moving sands of popular caprice and vulgar passion.³⁸

Here the paradox was laid bare: if Confederates broke the connection between earthly success and divine favor and conceded that they had no idea of the new nation's providential mission, why should they take comfort from "Providential agency and control"?

³⁶ Stephen Elliott, "Samson's Riddle": A Sermon Preached in Christ Church, Savannah, On Friday, March 27th, 1863 (Macon: Burke, Boykin & Co., 1863), 18, 13, 14.

³⁷ Tichenor, 14.

³⁸ Samuel H. Higgins, "The Mountain Moved; or, David upon the cause and cure of Public Calamity." Sermon Delivered on Fast Day, in Milledgeville, December 10th, 1863, At the Request of the General Assembly of Georgia (Milledgeville: Broughton, Nisbet, Barnes & Moore, 1863), 6, 18. Fox-Genovese and Genovese, 693, discuss this sermon and other invocations of Napoleon as a retributive instrument.

What remained was, effectively, a blind faith in God, along with a suspicion of the legibility of providence that worked against forms of national providentialism. Virginia Baptist Thomas Dunaway, on the Confederate fast day in April 1864, maintained that “mere success is no proof or proper test of truth and right, nor is failure any evidence of error or injustice.” It was “bad logic and worse theology” to imagine that a good cause would always succeed, while success itself “is too often interpreted as evidence of Divine approbation.” Like Elliott and Higgins, Dunaway reminded his church that “God has eternity before him for the accomplishment of his purposes.” Rather more bracingly, he charged God with taking his time in the eighteen centuries of Christian history that had so far elapsed: “If success be the proper test of truth, why has the Gospel had comparatively so little success? Why is it Mahomadanism [*sic*] has spread so rapidly and taken such a hold on the world?” This thinking led away from historical progress and a redemptive mission for the South, and toward a familiar distinction between the fallen world and the life to come. Only the “general and final judgment” would reconcile earth and heaven in history, Dunaway suggested; until then, “truth and right are often crushed to the earth, while injustice and error triumph.”³⁹ As the Union armies approached and swept over the churches, legislatures, and newspapers in which these ideas about the Confederacy were promoted, ordinary southerners could fall back on a theology that rescued them from providence and history. If they could not save the South, condemned for some inscrutable reason to be overrun by the North, southerners could concentrate on their own spiritual welfare and at least save themselves.⁴⁰

Confederate providentialism struggled against the inherent obstacles to a progressive mission for the slaveholding South, and against the hardships and defeats of the war. In 1860 Benjamin Palmer had based his defense of the South on the idea that slavery was a “divine trust” and had declared that the destiny of the South was to preserve the institution against the fanatical reformers of the North. His sermons in 1861 confidently predicted a northern defeat and positioned the South as the “last hope of self-government upon this continent.”⁴¹ The pressures of the war forced him to modify and finally to reject his providential predictions. In the spring of 1862, New Orleans fell to Benjamin Butler’s forces and Palmer became an exile from his own church. He settled in Columbia, filling the place vacated by his mentor, James Henley Thornwell, at

³⁹ Thomas S. Dunaway, *A Sermon Delivered before Coan Baptist Church, in Connection with a Day of National Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, April 1864* (Richmond: Enquirer Book and Job Press, 1864), 18, 19.

⁴⁰ These sources lead me to disagree with Daniel W. Stowell’s claim that, “to the very end, religious Confederates were certain that God would deliver the South and uphold its independence.” *Rebuilding Zion*, 37.

⁴¹ Benjamin M. Palmer, “Slavery a Divine Trust: Duty of the South to Preserve and Perpetuate It, A Sermon Preached in the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans, La., Nov. 29 1860,” in *Fast Day Sermons: Or, the Pulpit on the State of our Country* (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1861), 57–80; and Palmer, “National Responsibility,” 219.

both the First Presbyterian Church and the Theological Seminary. (Thornwell died in May 1862, comforted by the belief that though “the times are dark, the Lord reigns.”)⁴² For the rest of the war, Palmer wrote and delivered sermons throughout what was left of the Confederacy, traveling to state legislatures and local churches from Virginia to Georgia. He embraced the idea of Noah’s curse, but continued to suggest that emancipation might take place in the future.⁴³ Although he insisted that the South was defending God by opposing the presumptuous reformers of the North, he acknowledged the difficulty of discerning God’s intentions: “Providence is always very hard to be interpreted, when we are in the very current of events, drifting and whirling us along too rapidly for the comparison and thought which are necessary to scan the mysterious cypher in which God writes his will upon the age of human history.”⁴⁴

Palmer offered this consolation in a letter to his old parishioners in New Orleans, written in May 1864, but he had already begun to doubt the Confederacy’s chances of surviving the war. One Union chaplain, writing in November 1863, accused “the eloquent Dr. Palmer” of placing the Confederacy before God: “He was known to declare publicly, before he fled from the presence of the Yankee troops in New Orleans, that, if the Almighty should favor the cause of the Yankees, he should lose his confidence in him as a God of truth and justice!”⁴⁵ In fact, Palmer followed many of his colleagues in abandoning the idea of the Confederacy as its prospects diminished. In his letter to New Orleans in the spring of 1864, Palmer urged his old friends to recall that “this poor world is not our final home.”⁴⁶ In September he brought the same message to Richmond, overwhelming as sharp an observer as Mary Chesnut, the diarist and wife of Confederate minister James Chesnut. Palmer admitted from the pulpit that slavery was doomed, and even thanked God for this. In the absence of this old rationale for the Confederacy, he offered little hope to his audience: “It was hard to listen and not give way,” Chesnut wrote. “Despair was his word – and martyrdom. He offered us nothing more in this world than the martyr’s crown.” Not every providential projection was as bleak as this – Stephen Elliott, another preacher who brought Chesnut to tears in 1864, still gamely argued that the North was entering a providential trap even after the fall of Atlanta. But Palmer’s journey, like the course of southern providentialism in the brief years of the Confederacy, led toward personal salvation and

⁴² Palmer, ed., *Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, 515.

⁴³ *Sermons of Bishop Pierce and Rev. B. M. Palmer*, 31; Palmer, *Discourse Before the General Assembly of South Carolina*, 14–15.

⁴⁴ Palmer, “Letter to members of the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans,” May 20, 1864, in Thomas Carey Johnson, ed., *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987; originally published 1906), 277–82, at 280.

⁴⁵ “A Chaplain of the U.S. Army” [Stephen Alexander Hodgman], *The Nation’s Sin and Punishment; or, The Hand of God Visible in the Overthrow of Slavery* (New York: M. Doolady, 1864), 67–68.

⁴⁶ Palmer, “Letter to members of the First Presbyterian Church,” 281.

national ruin. "And so we came away," noted Chesnut in her description of that September sermon, "shaken to the depths."⁴⁷

2. "We Will Retrieve Our Destiny": Slavery, War, and Reunion

"A Glorious Career of Self-Regeneration"

In the twilight months between the Republican victory in November 1860 and Lincoln's arrival in Washington the following March, William Seward was not alone in believing that the grand destiny of the United States made secession unthinkable. *Harper's Magazine* continued its plea for national unity on the grounds of America's special purpose in history. In an editorial that leveled more scorn at "our ultra reformers" than at the separatists of the South, the magazine assured its readers that "we have a deepening sense of our having a Providential mission to fulfill."⁴⁸ The same sentiment was conveyed from northern pulpits on a thanksgiving day in November 1860, and once more on the special fast day appointed by James Buchanan on January 4, 1861. New York Episcopalian minister John Cotton Smith put the point as clearly as anyone in November, having recited the "wonderful chain" of events that linked America's origins to its great future: "It seems to me that God has not only thus clearly indicated that the destiny is a great and noble one which we are privileged to attain, but has not obscurely taught us that it is by the continued union of these States and the preservation of the integrity of the Republic that it is to be accomplished." He still clung to this hope when he revisited the topic on Buchanan's fast day in January, but he was shaken by South Carolina's precipitous action and tempered his predictions accordingly. America still had a "high destiny," but his countrymen should remember that they had a role to play in helping God to secure it: "But there is no such thing, we may be sure, in this respect, as manifest and irreversible destiny," he warned.⁴⁹

The parlous state of the nation appeared to encourage these providential projections and to remind Americans of the clear choice they faced between the Union as it was (and could be) and the catastrophe of a permanent secession. This was the moment in which Kentucky clergyman Robert J. Breckinridge began his war of words with Benjamin Palmer of Louisiana over the nation's destiny.⁵⁰ Breckinridge's family was divided by the war. His nephew, John, was vice-president of the United States when South Carolina seceded in 1860, and minister of war for the Confederate States by the time of Lee's surrender in

⁴⁷ C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 644, 607; and Elliott, *Vain is the Help of Man*, 12.

⁴⁸ "Editor's Table: The End and the Beginning," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 22, no. 130 (March 1861): 552–56, at 554, 556.

⁴⁹ John Cotton Smith, *Two Discourses on the State of the Country* (New York: John A. Gray, 1861), 5, 7, 28, 42. Smith's fast sermon was reprinted in *New York Times*, January 5, 1861, 2.

⁵⁰ See Chapter 6, notes 119–22 and accompanying text.

1865. Robert held on to his faith in America in spite of Palmer's barbs and the gradual northern acceptance of emancipation as a war aim. "The nation has been faithful in its lot, and true to its sublime mission," he insisted in the spring of 1861. "And now, in this great crisis, if God will own our efforts, we will retrieve our destiny."⁵¹ Breckinridge was only one of many Union supporters in the first half of 1861 who burnished their ideas about America's providential standing in this moment of adversity. If anything, the attack on Fort Sumter and the formal opening of the war gave a greater spur to this confident rhetoric.

On July 4 the usual anniversary ceremonies were held throughout the North and – to the surprise of at least some people – the familiar idea of the nation's higher purpose was once again rehearsed. In Newport, the Committee of Arrangements tapped businessman Henry James to deliver the oration. James delighted the crowd by admitting that a friend had approached him a few days earlier and had asked for reassurance that he would not, "under the circumstances, regale my auditors with the usual amount of spread-eagleism." James had been happy to oblige, if his friend was referring to "so clearly defined a Providential destiny for our Union that, do what we please, we shall never fall short of it." But if he was being asked to give up his belief in the redemptive potential of America, properly improved and transmitted to the rest of the world, "I could assure him that my soul was full of it, and it would be wholly my fault if my auditors did not feelingly respond to it." What his famous sons, William and Henry, would have made of this is unclear. But their father, who had spent enough time in England to ache for America's "expansive influence," was not about to give up on his country in the face of the Confederacy's selfish challenge.⁵²

The northern confidence that had been building since Sumter was short-lived. On July 21 Winfield Scott's troops were routed at Manassas Junction in the first Battle of Bull Run. Many people in the North had predicted a speedy Union victory; at Manassas, the Confederacy might instead have secured its independence, had its troops been more assiduous in their pursuit of Scott's bedraggled forces. The fact that this defeat was merely disastrous, rather than fatal to the Union cause, was of little consolation to observers in Washington and the North. Abraham Lincoln quickly issued a proclamation calling upon his countrymen to observe a day of fasting and humiliation on September 26. Some clergymen could not wait this long. Horace Bushnell took to his pulpit in Hartford on the Sunday after Bull Run and insisted on a new seriousness about the Union's purpose and prospects. His sermon – entitled *Reverses Needed* – excoriated northerners for their braggadocio and insisted

⁵¹ Robert J. Breckinridge, *The Civil War: Its Nature and End* (Cincinnati: Office of the Danville Review, 1861), 647.

⁵² Henry James, *The Social Significance of Our Institutions: An Oration Delivered by Request of the Citizens at Newport, R.I., July 4th, 1861* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861), 3–4, 22. Similar sentiments were offered by Harvard Law School professor Theophilus Parsons in his oration in Boston on the same day: *An Oration Delivered on the Fourth of July, 1861, Before the Municipal Authorities of the City of Boston* (Boston: J. E. Farwell & Co., 1861), 7–8.

that a still more explicit acknowledgment of God's control would be required to secure victory. The Confederates, after all, had rushed to include God in their new constitution. "It might not be amiss," suggested Bushnell, for Lincoln and Congress to do the same.⁵³

When Lincoln's fast day came around, this more somber tone prevailed throughout the North. The January fast ordered by James Buchanan had been patchily observed, not least because many Americans had lost all faith in their president and viewed his belated recourse to God as tasteless. (In Chicago, according to newspaper reports, the locals spent the day of fasting and humiliation frolicking in a heavy snowfall.)⁵⁴ The September fast was altogether more serious, as clergymen across the Union searched for a providential explanation both of the war and of the setback at Manassas. In New York, Roswell Hitchcock presented a catalog of "national offences" that began, as Horace Bushnell had, with the absence of God from the Constitution.⁵⁵ Hitchcock had been an especially energetic booster of America's providential significance. In a flamboyant article in the *American Theological Review* the previous year, he had claimed that, "if there be any method of Providence discerned, or discernible," America was "the favored continent of the future" that would send forth "the ships that carry the world's redemption."⁵⁶ In the chastened atmosphere of the September fast, as he searched for the sins that would explain secession and Bull Run, he sounded far less confident. Perhaps it was the nation's "territorial rapacity" that had incurred God's disfavor? Or the materialism of the population at large?⁵⁷ Other preachers engaged in the same speculation about what had caused these national reverses. The profaning of the Sabbath, suggested some. (Union forces had engaged in battle at Bull Run on a Sunday.) Cursing and profanity, suggested others.⁵⁸

The compulsion to identify a national sin, which Bull Run and the subsequent fast day had placed upon preachers throughout the North, created an opening for one prevalent interpretation of America's providential career that had previously been marginalized. Perhaps God had ordained secession, and denied an easy victory to the Union in Virginia, to punish the United States for slavery? The connection between the war and the sin of slavery was hardly

⁵³ Horace Bushnell, *Reverses Needed: A Discourse Delivered on the Sunday after the Disaster of Bull Run, in the North Church, Hartford* (Hartford: L. E. Hunt, 1861). Bushnell's sentiments were reprinted in the press soon after: see, for instance, "The Schooling of Civil War," *New York Evangelist*, August 29, 1861, 6. See also George B. Cheever, "The Decisive Blow: A Lesson of Bull Run," *Independent*, August 22, 1861, 1.

⁵⁴ "The National Fast," *Chicago Tribune*, January 5, 1861, 1.

⁵⁵ Roswell D. Hitchcock, *Our National Sin: A Sermon, Preached on the Day of the National Fast, September 26, 1861* (New York: Baker & Godwin, 1861).

⁵⁶ Hitchcock, "Historical Development of Christianity," *American Theological Review* 5 (February 1860): 28–54, at 54.

⁵⁷ Hitchcock, *Our National Sin*, 20, 23.

⁵⁸ R. L. Stanton, *Causes for National Humiliation: A Discourse, Delivered on the Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, Recommended by the President of the United States, September 26, 1861* (Cincinnati: Moore, Wilstach, Keys & Co., 1861), 12–13.

welcome in the North, and some clergymen tiptoed toward it in the fall of 1861. Horace Bushnell, when he finished complaining about the godless Constitution, acknowledged that his audience might be thinking about the “great and frowning misery of slavery,” but sidestepped the opportunity to include this among the nation’s sins: “A profound mystery of God hangs over it thus far, and the veil is yet to be lifted.”⁵⁹ Other ministers followed his lead in their September sermons, hoping to explain the recent providential chastisements without placing God on the side of William Lloyd Garrison or Wendell Phillips. Hugh Smith Carpenter of Brooklyn admitted to his congregation that “slavery is the secret underlying this strife” but, like Bushnell, he left his audience to draw its own conclusions about slavery’s precise relevance to the war. Joel Hawes of Hartford denied that emancipation was the object of the war and insisted that “the book of providence” was “sealed” in respect of this topic.⁶⁰

From Frederick Douglass’s vantage point in Rochester, too many fast-day preachers had dodged the obvious truth that the war had been caused by slavery: “The fast is not a repentance of the National Sin,” he complained, “but only of the consequence of that sin.”⁶¹ There were, in fact, a large number of fast sermons that made the connections Douglass urged between the future of slavery and the destiny of the United States. One Boston newspaper recorded its disgust at the prevalence of the “abolition God” in the city’s fast-day sermons, a complaint that was proudly reprinted by Garrison’s *Liberator*.⁶² The *Chicago Tribune* noted with approval that the subject of slavery had been taken up in many churches.⁶³ Thomas Skinner, the pastor of a church on Staten Island, maintained that slavery was the central cause of God’s quarrel with America and insisted that both North and South were to blame for the creation and maintenance of the institution – so both sides would be afflicted in the war. This sermon may have lacked the eloquence and concision of Lincoln’s second inaugural address in March 1865, but the president’s point had already been made more than three years earlier. If the problem of slavery could be solved, promised another clergyman, “national regeneration” would follow.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ “The Schooling of Civil War,” 6.

⁶⁰ Hugh Smith Carpenter, *The Relations of Religion to this War: A Sermon Delivered on Fast-Day, Sept. 26, 1861* (New York: W. A. Townsend, 1861), 15; and J. Hawes, *North and South; or, Four Questions Considered: What Have We Done? What Have We to Do? What Have We to Hope? What Have We to Fear? A Sermon, preached in the First Church in Hartford, on the Day of the National Fast, September 26, 1861* (Hartford: Case, Lockwood and Company, 1861), 14, 21.

⁶¹ Douglass’ *Monthly* 4, no. 5 (October 1861): 531.

⁶² “Fanatic Incantations to Baal,” *Liberator*, October 11, 1861, 1.

⁶³ “Blow Ye The Trumpet,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 27, 1861, 2. For a similar description of the emphasis on slavery in the fast-day sermons of Providence, Rhode Island, see “Fast Day in Providence, R.I.,” *New York Evangelist*, October 3, 1861, 4.

⁶⁴ Thomas H. Skinner Jr., *Comfort in Tribulation: An Address, Delivered in the Reformed Dutch Church, Stapleton, S.I. [Staten Island], September 26, 1861, a Day Kept as a National Fast* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1861); and George Leon Walker, *The Offered National Regeneration: A Sermon, Preached in the State Street Church, Portland, on the Occasion of the National Fast, September 26, 1861* (Portland: Advertiser Steam Job Office, 1861).

This sentiment was not universal. In the border states, the link between providence, emancipation, and reunion was hardly obvious or popular. But the easy tolerance in northern states for functionally proslavery rhetoric had been severely tested by the events of 1861, and already by September the ground had begun to shift. Edward Stearns, a Maryland preacher who found himself substituting for the regular minister at a fast-day service in New Jersey, was virtually run out of town by the locals for proclaiming that “busybodyism-in-other-mens-matters” was the national sin that had produced the conflict. Only God “has the right to intermeddle,” he observed, at which point members of the congregation hissed and walked out. (A vestryman seized Stearns’s text and delivered it to the Newark district attorney.)⁶⁵ Even in Washington, hardly a hotbed of abolitionism, the September fast provided a platform for the argument that emancipation was a providential imperative. A fast-day service at the E Street Baptist Church was interrupted when one of the speakers – a close relative of Vice-President Hannibal Hamlin – declared that slavery was an “abomination in the sight of God,” which would force upon Americans “judgments as severe as those of the Jews” unless the war was prosecuted for abolition. This was too much for the pastor, George Whitefield Samson, who had been backpedaling on the slavery issue since he had aroused the suspicions of Washington’s many apologists for slavery in 1856. (Samson’s crime: he was Charles Sumner’s landlord when the Massachusetts senator fell beneath the cane of Preston Brooks.) Samson called upon another minister present to shout down this disruptive talk, and the *New York Times* remarked sadly that the church leaders had imposed a new “gag law” to stifle the dangerous line of thinking.⁶⁶ But the airing of this point of view south of Pennsylvania suggests the reach of an abolitionist understanding of providentialism before the war was even six months old.⁶⁷

One striking aspect of these sermons in September 1861 was their insistence that the Union could not win the war until it had pledged to destroy slavery. The defeat at Bull Run was, from this perspective, remarkably helpful to the Union cause, because it demonstrated the folly of pursuing a military or political victory without first securing emancipation.⁶⁸ This blunt assessment of the nation’s fortunes – which was, in some cases, accompanied by the promise that there

⁶⁵ Edward J. Stearns, *The Sword of the Lord: A Sermon, Preached in the House of Prayer, Newark, New Jersey, on Thursday, September 26, 1861, Being the National Fast Day* (Baltimore: James S. Waters, 1861).

⁶⁶ “Views from the Capital,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1861, 5.

⁶⁷ For other examples, see William H. Brisbane, “Why the Judgment of God is Upon the Nation,” *Liberator*, October 25, 1861, 172; and the sermon of William W. Patton, reprinted in “First Congregational Church,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 27, 1861, 4.

⁶⁸ George Walker of Maine celebrated the Bull Run defeat for precisely this reason: “God seems determined not to let us succeed till we face the real question of slavery, and settle that. He shames us, belittles us, defeats us, because we flinch from that.” Walker, *The Offered National Regeneration*, 22.

would be more defeats and reverses before the truth sank in – was leavened with an insistence that the United States would eventually be “regenerated” by the conflict. The idea that emancipation might secure a bright future for America marked an important shift in the debate over slavery and God’s plan for the nation. Before 1861, abolitionists had produced a pessimistic understanding of God’s relationship with America, not only in response to the persistence of slavery but to counter the vanity of the pusillanimous white majority that clung to historical providentialism. Because abolitionists were largely ostracized, even by the emerging Republican Party in the 1850s, their judicial providentialism – promising divine wrath and national dissolution – seemed to lead away from politics altogether. (This was what troubled Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany in the 1850s, as they pondered the effects of the providentialism of wrath on ordinary Americans.) In the summer of 1861, the defeat at Manassas persuaded many northern “moderates” that they could no longer sustain their confidence in a special mission without considering God’s view of slavery, at which point the abolitionist perspective attained a relevance that it had never previously enjoyed.

Instead of simply adopting the judicial viewpoint of the abolitionists, northern clergymen and writers fused the two strands of providentialism and fitted a vision of divine wrath into their hopeful projections of America’s providential career. On the September 1861 fast day, this delicate maneuver was nimbly executed by New York preacher George Cheever, pastor of the Church of the Puritans on Union Square.⁶⁹ Since his college days at Bowdoin in the early 1820s, where he was perturbed by the sybaritic behavior of the “Eat, Drink, and Be Merry Club,” Cheever had committed himself to reform. He wrote biting editorials against the treatment of the southeastern Indians during the removal crisis of 1830, and he promoted the cause of temperance with an unusual zeal.⁷⁰ (In 1835, when he was living in Salem, he wrote a satire against a Unitarian distillery owner that resulted in a public whipping and thirty days in jail.)⁷¹ But Cheever was also a committed believer in America’s providential role. In 1841 he wrote a book entitled *God’s Hand in America*, which described the convergence of “two great lines of the Divine Providence”: American history and God’s plan for redeeming the world. “Our whole existence shall be a lofty course of freedom and piety,” he promised, “expansive as the world, and lasting as the continent we inhabit.” This destiny had to be defended from national sin, and especially the “one dark spot in our moral and political horizon”: slavery. Even before the Mexican War and the crisis over extending slavery into

⁶⁹ Robert M. York, *George B. Cheever, Religious and Social Reformer, 1807–1890*, University of Maine Studies, 2nd ser., no. 69 (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1955).

⁷⁰ Cheever’s contemporaries at Bowdoin included H. W. Longfellow and Franklin Pierce, as well as Nathaniel Hawthorne. (The latter was an enthusiastic member of the Eat, Drink, and Be Merry Club.) York, 21–22. For an example of Cheever’s writing on Cherokee removal, see his “Removal of the Indians,” *American Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 10 (January 1830): 701–18. York discusses Cheever’s involvement in the removal debate at 56–60.

⁷¹ York, 72–79.

the territories, Cheever had suggested the outlines of this redemptive argument about America's providential mission. The United States was destined to save the world, but if it failed to destroy slavery it would enact "a second Jewish tragedy on a wider and more awful scale."⁷²

Cheever withdrew from the acrid debates surrounding slavery in the late 1840s, but he returned to the topic gradually after the Compromise of 1850 and with particular urgency following the Kansas-Nebraska crisis.⁷³ His subsequent sermons and tracts were issued as pamphlets and reprinted in the religious press, and Cheever's audiences at the Church of the Puritans became so large that people spilled from the building onto the sidewalk to hear him speak.⁷⁴ On the fast day in September 1861, he had so much to say about the war that he needed to deliver a second sermon a few days later to complete his argument. (Both were reprinted in the *New York Times*.) Cheever quickly dismissed the evasion of other preachers who searched urgently for national sins without identifying slavery. "Nearly all nations on the earth have danced, chewed tobacco, drank ardent spirits and profaned his ordinances and his Sabbaths," Cheever noted, "but we have no proof that God ever judged a nation with a desolating war or rebellion growing out of any one of these sins."⁷⁵ The real cause of the war was slavery, and the Union would continue to suffer defeats until it placed emancipation at the center of its war aims. But if northerners changed their ways and identified slavery as their enemy, the rewards would be immense. Suddenly, it would be possible "for us to conquer the rebellion and deliver the whole nation at a single blow," which would transform the war from a providential punishment to the "greatest boon ever conferred upon us by Divine Providence." Cheever left his audience with a view that was more redemptive than punitive. A "glorious career of self-regeneration, freedom and beneficence" could be secured if slavery was destroyed.⁷⁶

Cheever was an unusual opponent of slavery, in that he retained his belief in America's providential purpose even as he arrayed God's wrath against the United States. But in 1861 he helped to broker a truce between abolitionists and "moderates" that would apply the judicial imperatives of the former to the

⁷² George B. Cheever, *God's Hand in America* (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1841), 125, 87, 142, 144.

⁷³ York, 146–63. Cheever preached and published repeatedly on abolitionist topics in the late 1850s. See, for example, his *God Against Slavery: And the Freedom and Duty of the Pulpit to Rebuke It, As a Sin Against God* (Cincinnati: American Reform Tract and Book Society, [1857]); *The Fire and Hammer of God's Word Against the Sin of Slavery* (New York: American Abolition Society, 1858); and *The Guilt of Slavery and the Crime of Slaveholding, Demonstrated from the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Company, 1860).

⁷⁴ York, 147. In spite of the crowds, a wealthy minority of Cheever's congregation attempted to wrest control of the church in 1857, and Cheever struggled with the Congregational hierarchy in the years before the war, even though he was more popular and prominent than ever as an antislavery campaigner.

⁷⁵ "Discourse by Dr. Cheever," *New York Times*, September 27, 1861, 8.

⁷⁶ "Dr. Cheever on the War: God's Method of Putting Down the Rebellion," *New York Times*, September 30, 1861, 8. York, 187, argues that the idea that emancipation was certain to destroy the Confederacy became an "obsession" for Cheever in 1861.

providential confidence of the latter: if the nation rejected emancipation, God would extend the war indefinitely and pour out his wrath upon the North and the South; but if Americans agreed to abolish slavery, God would continue to use the United States as an instrument for the world's redemption. Republican congressmen were so impressed with Cheever's message that they invited him to give a series of addresses in Washington in the first months of 1862, concerned that their colleagues (and the president) had failed to register the connection between emancipation and national redemption. Cheever twice addressed a packed audience in the House chamber, and produced what one observer called "the most terrific arraignment of slavery I ever listened to."⁷⁷ Washingtonians were even willing to pay for the privilege of hearing Cheever's "bold eloquence" at this difficult moment in the war, and his ideas were quickly taken up in House debates.⁷⁸ Although Cheever's view of slavery and the war was uncompromising, he tempered his warnings with the promise that the nation would find salvation – and an enlarged role in God's scheme for the world's improvement – if it could accept the providential logic of emancipation.

Colonization, Lincoln, and "the Will of Providence"

By the end of 1861, this idea that the nation's destiny could be retrieved through abolition had circulated from New England to the West and provided a powerful way of deciphering the unexpected setbacks to the Union cause. It was not immediately persuasive in Washington, where Lincoln and his cabinet had been trying over the summer to shore up their very fragile ties to the border states. In a maneuver that outraged Cheever and other observers, Lincoln overruled General John C. Frémont's "military emancipation" in Missouri in September 1861. He also reined in another general, David Hunter, the following May. The chorus outside Washington grew louder on this topic throughout the winter of 1861–62, and numerous commentators scanned the battlefield dispatches for

⁷⁷ After hearing his first address to Congress, more than thirty senators and representatives requested that Cheever undertake a series of lectures in the capital to pressure the administration on the question of emancipation. The quotation is from George W. Julian, reprinted in York, 191. Cheever's first Smithsonian address was reprinted in *Chicago Tribune*, January 18, 1862, 1. For a description of Cheever's second address at the Smithsonian Institution in February 1862 – which noted that the crowd was "completely magnetized" by Cheever's words – see Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Memoir of William Henry Channing* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, Lowrey & Co., 1887), 323. Channing estimated that 2,000 people squeezed into the House chamber to hear Cheever's second address. Frederick Douglass put the audience at twice this figure: "Dr. Cheever's Lecture at the Federal Capital," *Douglass' Monthly* 4, no. 9 (February 1862): 603.

⁷⁸ *Congressional Globe*, 37th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), January 6, 1862, 195 (Owen Lovejoy of Illinois). See also "The Higher Law in Congress," *The Circular*, January 16, 1862, 200 (Thomas Edwards of New Hampshire). On the twenty or so abolitionist lectures delivered at the Smithsonian Institution between December 1861 and April 1862 (including two by George Cheever), see Michael F. Conlin, "The Smithsonian Abolition Lecture Controversy: The Clash of Antislavery Politics with American Science in Wartime Washington," *Civil War History* 46, no. 4 (2000): 301–23.

evidence of Cheever's thesis: the Union could not win the war without abolition. Lincoln himself accepted the pleas of abolitionists, at least for the states in rebellion, in the fall of 1862. But the idea that emancipation would retrieve America's providential promise was remarkably thin in one crucial respect: it made no reference whatever to the fate of the slaves themselves after they had been given their freedom. Even a strident advocate of emancipation like Thomas Skinner demurred on this crucial point. "These things are hidden in the future," he told his Staten Island congregation on the September fast day. "God himself will determine them."⁷⁹

Some northerners – like the Democratic congressman Samuel Cox of Ohio, or the New York clergyman Henry Van Dyke – continued to use providential arguments to avoid the entire question of emancipation. In a House debate in June 1862 on the future of slavery in the capital itself, Cox urged his fellow legislators to defer to the God "who writes the history of nations," and to exchange their abolitionist impulses for a simple faith in providence: "I know that His power can solve these dark problems of our fate."⁸⁰ These deferrals were familiar to abolitionists and had led Frederick Douglass to wonder about the usefulness of the providential idiom itself the previous year: "Our faith is at once to be suspected the moment it leads us to fold our hands and leave the cause of the slave to Providence."⁸¹ As northern moderates began to accept that emancipation was a providential imperative, these long-standing forms of evasion were overtaken by a new understanding of God's plans for black people: emancipation was inevitable, but would not lead to a multiracial society or to equality within the United States. Even as magazine articles, congressional speeches, and sermons advanced the idea that God insisted upon abolition, northern whites invoked the same providential authority in arguing for segregation and even for black removal.

How could northerners accept emancipation as a divine imperative, while simultaneously investing new schemes of prejudice with providential authority? Part of the answer lies in the deep and abiding racism within northern society during the antebellum period. Even radical abolitionists had struggled to create a climate of mutual respect and equality between blacks and whites in the North, which was starkly stratified along racial lines. Skeptical whites circulated a simple formulation after 1861 to describe their change of heart on the question of abolition: "I never did, and do not now, care anything for the negro. But I have about concluded that God does."⁸² This aversion to racial coexistence

⁷⁹ Skinner, *Comfort in Tribulation*, 26.

⁸⁰ Henry J. Van Dyke, *The Spirituality and Independence of the Church, A Speech delivered in the Synod of New York, October 18, 1864* (New York: n.p., 1864), 16–21; and Samuel S. Cox, *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 37th Cong., 2nd sess. (House), June 3, 1862, 249.

⁸¹ "Danger to the Abolition Cause," *Douglass' Monthly* 4, no. 1 (June 1861): 466–67.

⁸² This phrase was recounted in a July 1862 address by the minister George Prentiss at Dartmouth College, reprinted as "The National Crisis," *American Theological Review* 16 (October 1862): 687–718, at 704. Prentiss claimed that a "distinguished politician of the old national democracy" had used these words in a public lecture. The following year, a very similar formulation of this

structured the northern acceptance of emancipation and facilitated a good deal of providential speculation about the alternatives to equality when the war had been won. *Harper's Magazine*, which explored the question of emancipation on several occasions, insisted both that abolition was inevitable and that blacks would never become fully American: they were "the great stumbling-block in the way of the nation," but God would eventually resolve their fate in a way that prevented racial amalgamation and coexistence. Blacks were "the one marked exception" to "the unity of the American people," but providence had brought them to America for a "temporary sojourn" and would soon bring them "back" to Africa in triumph.⁸³

These ideas about black inferiority and the need for expatriation recalled the rhetoric of the American Colonization Society in the 1820s, and the *Harper's* editorialists were encouraged in their speculation by the recent revival of colonization throughout the North and the West. Public support for the ACS had surged after the Compromise of 1850, and politicians looked not only to Africa but to the Caribbean and to Central America as they sought an outlet for the black population of the United States. As Harriet Beecher Stowe had demonstrated in the conclusion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the new advocates of colonization were more urgently opposed to slavery than their predecessors: if the ACS managers in the 1820s had viewed colonization as a way to head off a conflict between whites over the timing of abolition, promising a slow removal of the black population across a century or more, the leading lights of the colonization campaign in the 1850s and the early 1860s were focused on the social consequences of immediate abolition. Colonization fascinated Free Soilers and Republicans, especially those in the West who had fought to keep slavery out of Kansas.⁸⁴ It also appealed to people in the border states, who were either

sentiment appeared in a sermon by the militant abolitionist Gilbert Haven: "The State a Christian Brotherhood," in Haven, *National Sermons: Sermons, Speeches and Letters on Slavery and Its War: From the Passage of the Fugitive Slave Bill to the Election of President Grant* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1869), 317–60, at 348. Haven attributed the phrase to "a profane Bostonian."

⁸³ Samuel Osgood, "Victory," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 25, no. 146 (July 1862): 265–70, at 268; and A. H. Guernsey, "Indivisibility of the Nation," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 26, no. 153 (February 1863): 413–18, at 417.

⁸⁴ Although historians tended before the 1960s to orient Free Soilers and Republicans with abolitionists as they described the developing antislavery consensus in the North, more recent work has emphasized the deep-seated racism which shaped Free Soil and Republican ideas about the nation's future, and especially the future of the West. See Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002; originally published 1967); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995; originally published 1970); and James D. Bilotta, *Race and the Rise of the Republican Party, 1848–1865* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992). Foner is much more sympathetic to Free Soilers and Republicans than either Berwanger or Bilotta, arguing that they were less racist than other northerners and that their racism was sometimes more calculated than ideological – for example, in the case of border state politicians who endorsed colonization plans as a means to promote the abolition of slavery in their states. This scholarship on racism and Free Soil briefly pointed historians of the antebellum period toward the issue of

sincerely interested in gradual emancipation or concerned in the late 1850s that a social upheaval might leave them stranded with their freed slaves. Even as the new Republican Party moved toward accepting abolition as a prerequisite for the resumption of America's destiny, many of its most prominent spokesmen – including Abraham Lincoln – presented colonization as a providential injunction.⁸⁵

The Blair brothers of Missouri, Francis and Montgomery, were drawn toward the Republican Party during the Kansas crisis and declared that God intended both to free the slaves and to separate them from white Americans. Francis was elected to the House of Representatives from Missouri in 1856, the only Free Soil advocate to represent a slave state. That same year, his brother – a prominent lawyer – represented Dred Scott in his unsuccessful case before the Supreme Court. Both men were close to Lincoln: Montgomery was postmaster general in the war cabinet, and Francis served in Congress before accepting a military commission in 1862.⁸⁶ In the late 1850s Francis Blair lectured widely on the topic of “the destiny of the races of this continent,” building on arguments that he and other Republicans had advanced in Congress. In January 1859 he told a Boston audience that blacks had been “committed to our guardianship

race rather than slavery and inspired general studies of northern racism that were not limited to the territorial question: David Roediger *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990); Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); and Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), especially pages 235–45. But the lure of antislavery interpretations – which emphasize the abolitionist potential of Free Soil ideas and downplay their racism – persists for some historians, who look to reconcile democracy, popular politics, and the labor movement with the campaign against slavery in the early republic. (This interpretive grail would enable a contemporary historian to recast these awkward decades in American history as essentially progressive.) See, for instance, Sean Wilentz, “Slavery, Antislavery, and Jacksonian Democracy,” in Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway, eds., *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800–1880* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 202–23; Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824–1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 14–15, 123–43; Bruce Laurie, *Beyond Garrison: Antislavery and Social Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1–10, 84–124, 287–90; and Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 403–12.

⁸⁵ On the Republican embrace of colonization in the late 1850s, see Berwanger, 131–32; Foner, 261–80; and Bilotta, 113–18. Mark E. Neely Jr. has bravely conceded that the disappearance from the historical record of Lincoln's speeches to the Illinois ACS meeting in 1853 and 1855 has “probably helped Lincoln's reputation in modern times.” Neely, *The Last Best Hope of Earth: Abraham Lincoln and the Promise of America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 42–43. Other historians are less candid about Lincoln's views before 1860. Sean Wilentz presents Lincoln as badgered into a denial of racial equality only by realpolitik and Stephen Douglas's jibes in the 1858 Senate debates in Illinois. *Rise of American Democracy*, 734–44.

⁸⁶ Eric Foner, 268–74, offers a sympathetic assessment of the Blairs and other border state colonization supporters.

by the gracious Providence that has conferred so many blessings upon us in the achievement of our own liberties." God had now clearly indicated that the fate of blacks lay in the "torrid zone" of Central America.

Seeking "deliverance from a people who cannot assimilate with our people," Blair imagined a series of U.S. dependencies in the "vacant regions" of Latin America that would support the entire black population. (The Indians of North America, meanwhile, would throw their lot in with the Mexicans and might perhaps recapture some of the glory that they had lost before the arrival of Cortés or the *Mayflower*.) As a student of international affairs, Blair could see a precedent for all this: the new black dependencies of Central America would "become our India, but under happier auspices." Those who would condemn the scheme as visionary or unjust should remember that it conformed precisely to the dictates of providence, and that Americans might easily "bring retribution upon ourselves by striving to subvert with our devices the decrees of Omnipotence."⁸⁷ Both Francis and Montgomery Blair became champions of this thinking during the first years of the Civil War and won over Abraham Lincoln to their cause.⁸⁸

Lincoln had been an active member of his local auxiliary of the Colonization Society in Illinois during the early 1850s, and he viewed black expatriation as the most effective way to facilitate abolition.⁸⁹ When the war broke out, he quickly approved a plan to relocate blacks to the new colony of Chiriquí in Panama, a venture that was underwritten by northern businessmen who sought to develop the region's coal deposits. As with the ACS schemes for Liberia, Lincoln initially targeted free blacks rather than slaves and insisted that only volunteers should be sent; but he clearly imagined Chiriquí as a stepping-stone toward a mass removal of blacks from the United States.⁹⁰ He kept company with this outlandish scheme – and others involving Caribbean colonies – throughout his slow journey toward the immediate abolition of slavery. In August 1862, just six weeks before he issued the preliminary emancipation proclamation, he invited a group of black leaders to the White House to hear his pitch for Panama. Between blacks and whites, he argued, there was "a broader difference than exists between almost any other two races." The effects of this difference were

⁸⁷ Francis P. Blair, *The Destiny of the Races of This Continent, An Address Delivered Before the Mercantile Library Association of Boston, Massachusetts, on the 26th of January, 1859* (Washington, D.C.: Buell & Blanchard, 1859).

⁸⁸ According to the *New York Times*, "the accord of Mr. Lincoln's opinions with those of Mr. [Francis] Blair is understood to be perfect upon the entire subject" of colonization. Blair had made Lincoln a "convert" to his ideas, and the president now "cheerfully accepted the idea of a Central American home for the deported race." "Mr. Blair on Emancipation and Colonization," *New York Times*, April 17, 1862, 4. Montgomery Blair's letter to antislavery campaigners in New York on the merits of colonization was reprinted as "Refuge of Oppression," *Liberator*, March 21, 1862, 1.

⁸⁹ On Lincoln's embrace of colonization in the 1850s, see Michael Vorenberg, "Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Black Colonization," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 14, no. 2 (1993): 23–46.

⁹⁰ John Lindsay-Poland, *Emperors in the Jungle: The Hidden History of the U.S. in Panama* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 15; Vorenberg, 27.

deleterious to both sides when placed in close proximity. "But for your race among us," he observed bluntly, "there could not be war." It would therefore be "selfish" of northern free blacks – when considering the welfare both of whites and of southern slaves – to reject the challenge of building a viable black nation outside the United States.⁹¹

Lincoln did not present the colonization scheme as providential during this meeting, but his aides and his congressional supporters outlined the religious rationale for removal. He appointed Reverend James Mitchell as his superintendent for black colonization soon after taking office, and in the spring of 1862 Mitchell issued (via the Government Printing Office) a *Letter on the Relation of the White and African Races, Showing the Necessity of the Colonization of the Latter*.⁹² This appeal urged blacks to recognize the "divine economy" by which God had created different regions for different races and insisted that the United States would be able once more to be "the light of the world" if racial separation could be effected.⁹³ The same arguments were advanced by leading Republicans. According to Samuel Pomeroy, the Kansas senator who was an architect of the 1862 Homestead Act promoting white settlement in the West, blacks should look carefully at the Chiriquí scheme and "consider this as an opening of Providence."⁹⁴

On the Senate floor, the most tireless advocate of Lincoln's plan was James Doolittle of Wisconsin, who kept his fellow senators occupied for hours with elaborate calculations of mileage and passenger capacity and loading speed, while occasionally engaging in disputes with skeptics. (At one point, while listing the historical precedents for mass emigration, he tussled with David Wilmot of Pennsylvania on the number of Jews who had fled ancient Egypt in the Book of Exodus.) Doolittle insisted that God had "reserved" Central America for blacks and had even imagined the founding of a black empire in the tropics (under American direction). If his sums were correct, white Americans could look forward to the disappearance of virtually the entire black population – slave and free – within just seven years.⁹⁵

The Chiriquí enterprise had foundered by the end of 1862, not least because the governments of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Colombia angrily denied the right of the United States to establish its own colony in the region.⁹⁶ But Lincoln

⁹¹ Abraham Lincoln, "Address on Colonization to a Committee of Colored Men, Washington, D.C.," August 14, 1862, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 5: 370–75.

⁹² Mitchell had been the Indiana state commissioner of colonization in the 1850s, and he arranged Lincoln's audience with the Washington free black delegation in August 1862. Bilotta, 180, 452.

⁹³ James Mitchell, *Letter on the Relation of the White and African Races in the United States, Showing the Necessity of the Colonization of the Latter, Addressed to the President of the U.S.* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1862), 26, 27.

⁹⁴ Samuel Pomeroy, "To the Free Colored People of the United States," in *Chicago Tribune*, August 28, 1862, 4.

⁹⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 37th Cong., 2nd sess. (Senate), April 11, 1862, 97, 98.

⁹⁶ The *Chicago Tribune* reported as early as September 1862 that the Chiriquí scheme had been abandoned "partly in consequence of the remonstrance of the Costa Rican minister," though the paper ominously noted that the thoughts of the Lincoln administration were now "directed

continued to endorse other colonization schemes even after he had issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Meanwhile, the American Colonization Society looked to exploit the endorsement of colonization at the very highest levels of government. The ACS was enjoying its revival, happy to concur with politicians and antislavery advocates like Harriet Beecher Stowe that emancipation was imminent and that Liberia might meliorate its convulsive effects on American society. Although ACS managers (and the editors of the *African Repository*) were placed in an awkward position by the Republican endorsement of Panama and the Caribbean as the most promising destinations for black colonists, the society revived the old notion that American slavery would lead to the redemption of the African continent.⁹⁷ When the Chiriquí scheme began to founder, the ACS confidently pointed to the well-established settlements in Liberia and insisted that the providential beauty of an African “return” trumped the convenience of a shorter passage to the isthmus.⁹⁸

The same argument, ironically, was appropriated by black separatists like Alexander Crummell and also by Liberians who saw a silver lining to American racism. Crummell and Liberian preacher Edward Blyden toured the United States in the early years of the war, targeting black audiences in particular and outlining a historical providentialism that linked America and Africa through the career of Liberia. In their speeches and promotional literature, these black voices claimed that Liberia had followed America’s example and had become providentially favored. Having consolidated the independence it won in 1847 by securing diplomatic recognition from the Lincoln administration, Liberia now stood ready to receive a black exodus from the United States.⁹⁹ Separatists had their own reasons for encouraging this renewed interest in colonization; from the frequency with which the speeches of black leaders were reprinted in the *African Repository*, white colonization supporters clearly hoped to launder

to the valley of the Amazon.” “The New Colonization Scheme Abandoned,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 1, 1862, 1. See also “Negro Colonization: Brazil Proposed by Our Minister,” *New York Times*, December 28, 1862, 2; and Vorenberg, 35–37.

⁹⁷ See, for instance, ACS president J. H. Latrobe’s claim at the society’s annual meeting in 1862 that Liberia was the most propitious destination for removed blacks: “African colonization is destiny.” “Summary of the Annual Meeting, January 21, 1862,” *African Repository* 38, no. 2 (February 1862): 46–53, at 52.

⁹⁸ Latrobe, *African Repository* 38, no. 10 (October 1862): 289–94.

⁹⁹ The speeches of Blyden, Crummell, and other black advocates of colonization were printed and distributed in the United States, either directly or through the *African Repository* and the media more generally. Invariably, these speeches endorsed the providential argument that God had intended the migration of blacks from Africa to America and back again. See Alexander Crummell, *Relations and Duties of Free Colored Men in America to Africa* (Hartford: Case, Lockwood and Company, 1861); Edward W. Blyden, *Liberia’s Offering* (New York: J. A. Gray, 1862); “Relations and Duties of Free Colored Men,” *African Repository* 37, no. 4 (April 1861): 97–107; “Liberia College,” *North American Review* 97, no. 200 (July 1863): 102–32; and Blyden, “The Call of Providence,” *African Repository* 40, no. 11 (November 1864): 321–26; and 40, no. 12 (December 1864): 353–59. See also Elliott P. Skinner, *African Americans and U.S. Policy toward Africa, 1850–1924: In Defense of Black Nationality* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1992), 63–65.

their providential logic and motives with black endorsements.¹⁰⁰ But most free blacks within the United States were roundly opposed to the Liberian, Haitian, and Central American schemes.¹⁰¹ They were gradually joined by the majority of white antislavery advocates, who realized by 1863 that the mass departure of blacks was a pipe dream.

Because Lincoln's preliminary emancipation proclamation followed so soon after his brusque encounter with the black delegation in August 1862, it has been easy for historians to downplay his colonization dalliance, or to present it as a way station toward the affirmation of black freedom within the United States. The *Chicago Tribune* described colonization in 1864 as a "safety valve for weak consciences"; Lincoln's sympathetic biographers have suggested that the president strengthened his commitment to black rights after 1863.¹⁰² This is an appealing but misleading assessment. Republicans eventually lost faith in colonization not because they rejected its fundamental premise – that God had ordained indelible differences between the races and that they should not mingle freely with each other – but because the implementation of this divine ordinance seemed utterly impracticable, even with the support of the federal government. A saving grace of Free Soil racism was that its dreams of black removal usually rested upon the voluntary principle: blacks would themselves recognize the lure of providential separatism, and colonization would

¹⁰⁰ One of the most enthusiastic exponents of the providential argument for colonization, the white missionary Hollis Read, employed Frederick Douglass's insistence that blacks be "let alone" after emancipation to promote black separatism in Liberia. Read, *The Negro Problem Solved; or, Africa as She Was, As She Is, and As She Shall Be. Her Curse and Her Cure* (New York: A. A. Constantine, 1864), 187.

¹⁰¹ Even Frederick Douglass, a committed and long-term opponent of black colonization, flirted with the idea of emigration to Haiti in the months before the firing on Sumter. Douglass was also reluctant to impugn the motives of black colonization advocates like Crummell and Martin Delany, although he consistently rejected the idea of an organized black exodus from the United States. "The Future of Africa," *Douglass' Monthly* 5, no. 2 (July 1862), 674–75; and "Dr. M. R. Delany," *Douglass' Monthly* 5, no. 3 (August 1862): 695.

¹⁰² "The End of Colonization," *Chicago Tribune*, March 23, 1864, 2. Two recent biographies of Lincoln make only passing references to Lincoln's insistence on colonization as a condition of emancipation in 1862: Neely, *The Last Best Hope of Earth*; and William E. Gienapp, *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Gabor Boritt and Allen C. Guelzo, two prominent Lincoln scholars, have cited Frederick Douglass's public admiration for Lincoln as evidence that the president quickly moved beyond the chimera of colonization. (Boritt invokes Douglass's description of Lincoln as the "black man's president"; Guelzo produces Douglass as a witness that Lincoln had "sloughed off the idea of colonization" by the end of 1863.) Boritt, "Did He Dream of a Lily-White America? The Voyage to Linconia," in Boritt, ed., *The Lincoln Enigma: The Changing Faces of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–19, at 18; and Allen C. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 350. Richard Carwardine argues that Lincoln's faith in colonization was "rooted as much in ethical concern as in self-deception" and that the Chiriquí scheme (along with similar proposals) was tailored to public opinion: "Colonization was the sugar around the pill of emancipation." Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 25,

lose its luster if it was imposed upon them.¹⁰³ Some northerners advanced the idea of compulsory emigration, especially as the tide of the war turned decisively against the Confederacy, but most mothballed their hopes for a glorious black republic (and a racially purified white one) and retreated into vagueness about a black future in America. Colonization supporters continued to remind white Americans of the challenge ahead. Phineas Gurley, minister of the Washington church attended by Lincoln during the war, reminded the ACS annual meeting in January 1864 that “when the slavery question shall have been solved, the negro question will remain.” But if the “blessed work” of black removal seemed beyond the bounds of possibility, it was easy for northerners to retreat into silence on the subject of what God intended for blacks after emancipation.¹⁰⁴

In the northern states, the onset of war fostered an idea about slavery and providence that was more robust than anything generated by Confederate preachers and orators. The claim that God sought the extirpation of slavery was hard for some to accept, but it had the virtue of both explaining the current adversity and promising a bright future for the United States. It also allowed antislavery advocates to present the war itself as a visitation of providence upon the entire nation, something that neither North nor South had wanted or intended to bring about. This made it much easier for northern orators to imagine a sublime future for a reunited and purified nation at the war’s conclusion. Paeans to the “regenerated nation” resounded in northern war rhetoric.¹⁰⁵ The notion that America’s already lofty destiny would be transfigured by the war was common even in 1861 and 1862. Slavery, the “plague spot” that had long disfigured the nation, was to be removed through a conflict so severe that (in the words of one New York minister) “we shall appreciate our mission, and God will force us to fulfill our mission.”¹⁰⁶ These ecstatic visions of a purified nation and a “future destiny far more glorious” preserved the providential integrity of American history without determining a role for the newly emancipated black

¹⁰³ See, for example, Francis Blair’s rejection of the charge that he sought to remove America’s black population by force: “Hon. F. P. Blair to His Constituents,” *New York Times*, October 18, 1862, 2. Blair clung to the idea that colonization could be both providential and voluntary.

¹⁰⁴ Gurley’s address to the ACS annual meeting, held on January 20, 1864, in Washington, was reprinted in *African Repository* 40, no. 1 (January 1864): 57–60. At the society’s annual meeting in January 1865, Senator James Doolittle continued to argue for black colonization even after the republic had been “regenerated and purified from slavery,” and he still believed that blacks themselves would eventually embrace emigration. (He grumbled that he had been misrepresented as an advocate of expulsion by “the advocates of the new theory of miscegenation of whites and blacks.”) *African Repository* 41, no. 2 (February 1865): 53–58.

¹⁰⁵ Julian M. Sturtevant, *The Lessons of our National Conflict: Address to the Alumni of Yale College, at their Annual Meeting, July 24, 1861* (New Haven: Thomas J. Stafford, 1861), 21.

¹⁰⁶ Frederick G. Clark, *Thankfulness: Its Occasions and Responsibilities, A Sermon Preached in the West Twenty-Third Street Presbyterian Church, City of New-York, on Thanksgiving-Day, Nov. 28th, 1861* (New York: Ivison, Phinney & Co., 1861), 17, 23.

population.¹⁰⁷ The most vocal expressions of providential intent suggested that blacks belonged somewhere else; or, if they remained within the United States, that they would occupy the subordinate position in society for which they had been designed by providence. Little wonder that some conservative northerners seized upon Lincoln's remarks about racial difference (as he promoted colonization in August 1862) to argue that, in effect, both the North and the South rested upon the same "corner-stone" of inequality that Alexander Stephens had celebrated a month before the firing on Fort Sumter.¹⁰⁸

How was it possible for white Americans to imagine that they could retrieve a glorious future for the United States without securing equality for black people? The deep-seated racism of the northern states hardly encouraged a full accounting of the rights and needs of African Americans; but the retrieval of historical providentialism during the Civil War also led Americans away from a sustained consideration of racial coexistence after slavery. Judicial providentialism – which underpinned the radical abolitionist critique before 1860 – placed an emphasis on the cultivation of virtue and the moral standing of a nation, a perspective that drew attention to blacks themselves as well as to the institution of slavery. Historical providentialism, by contrast, situated the Civil War in a providential drama that was stretched across history: both slavery and blacks were obstacles to the realization of America's destiny, and so the United States had to purge itself of both if it were to resume its upward track toward the world's improvement. The surge of colonization enthusiasm even as the Republican Party embraced immediate abolition was hardly surprising, from this perspective: the removal of blacks and the dismantling of slavery would relieve white Americans from the cumbersome task of recounting the long history of blacks in America, or finding a place for freed slaves in the nation's future. In the meantime, whites could focus intently on the Emancipation Proclamation (or the war more generally) as the pivot in their providential career.

¹⁰⁷ W. W. Everts, fast sermon delivered at the First Baptist Church of Chicago, April 30, 1863, in "The National Fast," *Chicago Tribune*, May 1, 1863, 4.

¹⁰⁸ The most infamous promoter of this apparent congruence between Lincoln and Stephens was Samuel F. B. Morse, son of Jedidiah Morse and (among many other things) the pioneer of the telegraph. One of Morse's acquaintances wrote to him in 1863 to complain that Morse had apparently rejected the Emancipation Proclamation; Morse replied that he was convinced of the inferiority of blacks and that (clutching Lincoln's remarks in August 1862 on colonization) "I need not cross the Potomac to find the same great truth proclaimed in a quarter entitled to respect, and by one who politically outranks the Vice-President of the Confederacy." Edward N. Crosby and S. F. B. Morse, *The Letter of a Republican, Edward N. Crosby, Esq., of Poughkeepsie, to Prof. S.F.B. Morse, Feb. 25, 1863, and Prof. Morse's Reply, March 2d, 1863*, Papers from the Society for the Diffusion of Political Knowledge, no. 4, in Frank Freidel, ed., *Union Pamphlets of the Civil War, 1861–1865*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1967), 2: 630–69, at 643. For a sense of Morse's varied careers and multiple eccentricities, see Jill Lepore, *A is for American: Letters and Other Characters in the Newly United States* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002) 139–61.

Lincoln himself repeatedly looked for a providential purpose in the war.¹⁰⁹ When he was pressed on whether God intended emancipation by a Quaker delegation in June 1862, he spoke of his hope that he “might be an instrument in God’s hands of accomplishing a great work,” but demurred on what this might oblige him to do.¹¹⁰ In September 1862, a year after the first northern fast had popularized the providential link between emancipation and victory, Lincoln searched his soul for guidance on how to proceed. He told an anti-slavery delegation from Chicago that he had an “earnest desire to know the will of Providence on this matter.” He wrote a note to himself, preserved in his papers, pondering the “will of God” and noting of the northern and southern appeals to providence that “God can not be *for* and *against* the same thing at the same time.” Then, on September 22, he issued his preliminary emancipation proclamation, freeing the slaves in those Confederate states that refused to surrender before January 1, 1863.¹¹¹ This proclamation confirmed that “the effort to colonize persons of African descent” in Latin America “will be continued,” a position he set out in greater detail in his message to Congress on December 1. The December message also outlined a plan for gradual emancipation in the border states (and any Confederate states that stood down before January 1) that would free all slaves by 1900. By the end of 1862, Lincoln had come to accept the providential logic of abolition while assuring white Americans that blacks would realize their destiny outside the United States.

In his December message, Lincoln honed this argument. While admitting that his colonization efforts had made little headway among blacks themselves, he suggested that black opinion was “improving” and that whites could look forward to “considerable migration” of blacks to Liberia and Haiti. Even if colonization was not immediately successful, Lincoln promised that freed slaves would do the same kinds of jobs, and live in the same places, after emancipation, a pledge intended to soothe northern anxieties about racial mixing and social equality. The end of slavery made it less likely that blacks would come north, Lincoln insisted. Instead, “their old masters will give them wages at least until new laborers can be procured.” Freed slaves would be happy to “give their labor for the wages, till new homes can be found for them, in congenial climes, and with people of their own blood and race.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Lincoln’s religious thinking, and especially his providentialism, was the theme of William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People: A Study of the Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959). For more recent studies that insist on Lincoln’s providential thinking or his “Calvinist transformation” in the White House, see Guelzo, *Redeemer President*; Carwardine, 221–28; and Nicholas Parillo, “Lincoln’s Calvinist Transformation: Emancipation and War,” *Civil War History* 46, no. 3 (2000): 227–53.

¹¹⁰ Lincoln, “Remarks to a Delegation of Progressive Friends,” June 20, 1862, in Basler, ed., 5: 278–79.

¹¹¹ “Reply to Chicago Emancipation Memorial,” September 13, 1862, in *ibid.*, 419–25; “Meditation on the Divine Will,” September [2?], 1862, in *ibid.*, 403–4; and “Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation,” September 22, 1862, in *ibid.*, 433–36.

¹¹² “Annual Message to Congress,” December 1, 1862, in *ibid.*, 518–37, at 521, 535–36.

Lincoln was a masterful politician and a sincere believer in the role of God in history. Having accepted that emancipation was God's will and a prerequisite for peace in America, Lincoln emphasized the redemptive possibilities of the United States without discussing God's plans for the freed slaves. His thoughts about the future of blacks in the United States were at best inchoate, at worst hostile; but he had begun to develop the idea of the war as a national trial that could lead to redemption – not only of the United States but of the world at large.¹¹³ The last section of Lincoln's December 1862 message to Congress is much better known than his clumsy parsing of black freedom: he observed that "we cannot escape history," and that the "fiery trial" of the Civil War "will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation." Emancipation was the means by which the nation could be reunited, and the "last, best hope of earth" – the United States – could be secured.¹¹⁴ The numerous iterations of this same argument that had emerged since 1861 shared Lincoln's sense that America was to be redeemed not by equality or inclusion but by the termination of slavery. And so the argument that emerged about God, slavery, and war in the northern states provided only a weak platform for securing black rights after Appomattox.

Lincoln is a difficult figure to engage critically because he occupies a special position in American history. The sense that Lincoln was truly a providential man, that the nation was blessed with a figure of Old Testament aspect at precisely the moment of its greatest trial, leaks into even scholarly work on the United States.¹¹⁵ In the English Civil War, as we have seen, Oliver Cromwell proved to be a divisive figure both during the conflict and after his death. Neither Charles I nor his sons offered much clarity to English thinkers eager to retain their providential bearings through the maze of the seventeenth century. But Lincoln has routinely been credited with saving the Union and with destroying

¹¹³ George F. Fredrickson and James D. Bilotta have each given credence to the account of Benjamin F. Butler that, in the last weeks of his life, Lincoln was receptive to Butler's bizarre suggestion that another massive colonization scheme should be pursued in Central America: this time, black soldiers would be transported to Panama and would begin to dig an isthmian canal. Benjamin F. Butler, *Butler's Book: Autobiography and Personal Reminiscences* (Boston: A. M. Thayer & Co., 1892), 578–79. I am inclined to share the doubts of Mark E. Neely Jr. about Lincoln's supposed endorsement of this scheme, not least because this emphasis on the canal seems to belong so firmly to the early 1890s, when Butler was writing his memoir. Neely, "Abraham Lincoln and Black Colonization: Benjamin Butler's Spurious Testimony," *Civil War History* 25, no. 1 (1979): 77–83. Although Neely has produced circumstantial evidence to undermine Butler's account, it is notable that Lincoln never formally disassociated himself from the colonization agenda, which he had pursued so publicly in the first years of his administration. On Lincoln's limited thinking about the future of blacks after emancipation, see Guelzo, 402–3. Bilotta reminds us that colonization continued to inspire many Republicans (including Francis Blair and James Mitchell) even after the war's conclusion. Bilotta, 455, 463, 471.

¹¹⁴ Lincoln, "Annual Message to Congress," in Basler, ed., 5: 537.

¹¹⁵ A venerable example is Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People*, though many more recent studies struggle against the instinct to apotheosize Lincoln.

slavery. His achievement in the first regard demonstrated, as his contemporaries noted, that the United States was more than just a compact between people with overlapping interests. By abolishing slavery, he redeemed the promise of the Declaration of Independence and enabled Americans to imagine the course of freedom in the United States as progressive. Contemporary historians write about the rise of American liberty and plot their ascending lines directly through Fort Sumter and the Emancipation Proclamation. One can already see the outlines of this interpretation in 1865, when Lincoln condensed his view of the war into the second inaugural address, then fell victim to an assassination attempt that seemed like a martyring.¹¹⁶

It has been argued that Lincoln saw the war in a fundamentally different way than his fellow countrymen did and that the second inaugural was the moment in which the gulf between his higher understanding and the crass triumphalism of northern partisans came into clear relief.¹¹⁷ Though Lincoln's eloquence in the short address was overpowering, his theme would not have surprised the many northerners who had recognized a providential connection between abolition and national deliverance after 1861. Compared with the demagoguery of Henry Ward Beecher in the war's final months, Lincoln's sober insistence that the prayers of both North and South could not be answered by God, nor the hopes of either side fully realized, belongs in a different register entirely. But Lincoln's principal argument was familiar: neither the North nor the South had expected or intended the war, which had been devised by God to punish the entire nation for the sin of slavery; victory could not be achieved until slavery had been destroyed.¹¹⁸ Lincoln may, perhaps, have trimmed his usual insistence on America's redemptive purpose – what he called its “vast future” – given his suspicions of a vindictive or chauvinistic streak in northern opinion. Soon after he delivered the address, the New York businessman Thurlow Weed wrote to congratulate Lincoln on another recent speech. Oddly, the president misread the letter and imagined that Weed had praised the inaugural instead. Here he betrayed his awareness of the audience for the address. He thought that it would “wear as well as – perhaps better than – any thing I have

¹¹⁶ Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address,” March 4, 1865, in Basler, ed., 8: 332–33. Lydia Maria Child, one of Lincoln's critics in the early years of the war, described him as a “great gift from Providence” soon after his assassination. Cited in Carolyn L. Karcher, *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 486.

¹¹⁷ Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 426–37.

¹¹⁸ On James Buchanan's fast day in January 1861, even Henry Ward Beecher had insisted that “the whole nation is guilty,” and imagined God arraigning the North as surely as the South for its forfeiture of the providential bounty. “Our Blameworthiness,” in Beecher, *Freedom and War: Discourses on Topics Suggested by the Times* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), 57–83. For other precursors of the second inaugural, see Skinner, *Comfort in Tribulation*, 12–16; Herrick Johnson, *The Nation's Duty: A Thanksgiving Sermon, Preached in the Third Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Thursday, November 27, 1862* (Pittsburgh: W. S. Haven, 1862), 17–18; and Hodgman, 78–79, 89.

produced; but I believe it is not immediately popular. Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them."¹¹⁹ In fact, the idea of a difference of purpose between God and America had sustained antislavery orators since the war's first year (in some cases, since the 1830s). Lincoln's achievement was to remind northern listeners of this fact in a moment at which their triumphs might finally distract them from the providential meaning of the war.

It should also be remembered that Lincoln himself, in his earlier addresses, had echoed the more familiar version of these sentiments: that the closing of the gap between America and God, which would be achieved through emancipation, would inaugurate the destiny that the United States had been promised since its founding. In July 1862, a little before he accepted the abolitionist argument about God's purpose in the war, Lincoln gathered together a group of politicians from the border states and begged for their support. America was in "great peril" and required "the loftiest views, and boldest action to bring it speedy relief." He asked his wary audience to commit themselves to gradual emancipation and promised to scour South America for the land required to remove African Americans permanently from the Union. But then he offered something in return for their willingness to sacrifice slavery: the recovery of the nation's progressive role in history and the restoration of its purpose in the past and the future. "Once relieved" of slavery, Lincoln assured Americans, the nation's "form of government is saved to the world; its beloved history, and cherished memories, are vindicated; and its happy future fully assured, and rendered inconceivably grand."¹²⁰ Here and elsewhere in his war rhetoric, Lincoln's political instincts and his religious convictions pushed him toward a powerful reassertion of historical providentialism. Abolition was a necessity for white Americans not because it was the right thing to do in the abstract, but because it was essential to making sense of American history. But the idea that abolition would cleanse America's past and "fully assure" its glorious future amounted to a new form of providential escapism. Lincoln placed enormous emphasis on the cathartic possibilities of emancipation and on the historical continuity of the United States. As a result, white Americans were encouraged to see abolition as a panacea, rather than an opportunity to reflect on slavery's tortured past and to make reparations to its millions of victims.

Lincoln would surely have reconsidered his providential vision had he lived to preside over the "vast future" that he had predicted for the postwar United States; instead, to the surprise of everyone, the first episode in the nation's revitalized career was his assassination. This shocking reverse occasioned an outpouring of providential speculation that, ironically, served to fossilize Lincoln's wartime understanding of God's scheme for America. A number of eulogies

¹¹⁹ "Letter to Thurlow Weed," March 15, 1865, in Basler, ed., 8: 356.

¹²⁰ "Appeal to Border State Representatives to Favor Compensated Emancipation," July 12, 1862, in *ibid.*, 5: 319.

followed the lead of Phineas Gurley, who noted at Lincoln's burial ceremony that his death was a "mysterious and a most afflicting visitation."¹²¹ Some found solace in the second inaugural, with its oddly prescient insistence that "the Almighty has His own purposes."¹²² Others seemed quietly relieved that Lincoln (and his reputation) had been spared the difficult task of Reconstruction, especially because the president had already clashed with Radical Republicans wary of a lenient readmission of the defeated Confederate states.¹²³ But in affirming Lincoln's status as a providential instrument, many eulogists agreed with Phineas Gurley that God had "raised him up for a great and glorious mission," which Lincoln had now accomplished.¹²⁴ According to one New York minister, God had permitted Lincoln's death to "isolate the special work he has done, lest by any possible mischance the flawless beauty and symmetric oneness of the President's career should be impaired."¹²⁵ Antislavery rhetoric had tended to condition America's redemption on emancipation alone. The circumstances of Lincoln's death seemed only to confirm that the abolition of slavery, rather than the achievement of equality for black Americans, was the capstone of the providential plan – and that Lincoln was the nation's deliverer.¹²⁶

¹²¹ *Illustrated Life, Services, Martyrdom and Funeral of Abraham Lincoln* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson and Brothers, 1866), 222.

¹²² Schuyler Colfax, "Address at Bryan Hall, Chicago, April 30, 1865," in *ibid.*, 261–75, 271.

¹²³ Warren H. Cudworth, "Funeral Sermon," in *Sermons Preached in Boston on the Death of Abraham Lincoln* (Boston: J. E. Tilton and Company, 1865), 197–212. This view was particularly prevalent among radical abolitionists: Wendell Phillips, "Eulogy for Abraham Lincoln," April 23, 1865, in Phillips, *Speeches, Lectures and Letters, Second Series* (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1891), 446–53; and Lydia Maria Child, letter to S. Shaw, undated [April 1865?], reprinted in Deborah Pickman Clifford, *Crusader for Freedom: A Life of Lydia Maria Child* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 274.

¹²⁴ *Illustrated Life*, 224.

¹²⁵ Rev. Henry W. Bellows, "Sermon on the Death of President Lincoln," in *Our Martyr President, Abraham Lincoln. Voices from the Pulpit of New York and Brooklyn* (New York: Tibbals & Whiting, 1865), 49–63, at 58. See also A. N. Littlejohn, in *ibid.*, 145–58; Theodore L. Culyer, in *ibid.*, 159–72; Henry B. Smith, in *ibid.*, 359–81; Hiram Walbridge's speech in New York City, reprinted in *Illustrated Life*, 288–93; and Thomas Mears Eddy, *Abraham Lincoln: A Memorial Discourse, delivered at a union meeting, held in Waukegan, Illinois, April 19, 1865* (Chicago: Methodist Book Depository), 18, 23. Lincoln's role as an instrument of providence in destroying slavery was celebrated in thanksgiving sermons in December 1865. See, for instance, Samuel D. Burchard, "The Great Things God Has Done For This Nation," in *New York Times*, December 8, 1865, 2.

¹²⁶ There were exceptions: Boston minister James Freeman Clarke insisted in his funeral sermon for Lincoln that the assassination was intended by providence to stiffen the resolve of the North, and that the death of the president would produce a northern commitment to black suffrage that would never have been possible otherwise. *Sermons Preached in Boston*, 89–103. But more typical was the cautious reception of Andrew Johnson from the *Christian Advocate*, which determined in July 1865 that God would "use [Johnson] as he did Moses and Mr. Lincoln," but that black suffrage was not inevitable. "Providence may see that the full enfranchisement of the negro would be a greater trial to the nation than its delay, even though long deferred, would be to the negro himself." "A Canaan in the South," *Christian Advocate*, July 13, 1865, 218.

Conclusion: "The Great Deliverance"

Since the late 1820s, abolitionists had predicted that the United States could not escape from a wrathful God. Some, like William Lloyd Garrison, seemed unimpressed by the idea that the nation had been chosen by God to redeem the world, and instead they fashioned their critiques from more abstract principles of justice and law. Others, like George Cheever, combined support for historical providentialism with the warning that the nation would forfeit its destiny unless it removed the "plague spot" of slavery. After secession, northern public opinion was finally amenable to the idea that God had a controversy with the American people and that this would not be resolved until slavery had been abolished. But those orators and ministers who accepted the providential logic of emancipation struggled to include the quality of black freedom in their assessment of what America owed to the slaves. As slavery rather than racial supremacy became the national sin, and the Emancipation Proclamation became the means through which this sin was expiated, the crucial details of black persistence in America were marginalized. Reconstruction had become, in essence, a providential afterthought.

Robert J. Breckinridge had chosen the Union over the Confederacy in 1861 and had worked on Lincoln's behalf to keep his state of Kentucky – and its many slaveholders – in the Union. In the summer of 1865, basking in the national triumph, Breckinridge returned to his alma mater of Union College in Schenectady, New York, to address the school's Phi Beta Kappa Society. His speech, "The Great Deliverance and the New Career," was reprinted in *Littell's Living Age*, a popular national magazine. Breckinridge was under no illusions about the difficulties of reconstructing the United States and urged against the idea that Americans were "standing on the threshold of a political millennium, which must necessarily emerge from the past." He was aware of the "hundreds of thousands of slain men" whose memories overshadowed any sense of jubilee. But, after acknowledging that the war had ravaged the North as well as the South, he insisted that "our delivered country" would now embark on "her new career, wiser, freer, more powerful than before." Americans had to "consecrate ourselves afresh to our higher destiny," which involved a mission of peace, instruction, and example that would "bless the human race."

The abolition of slavery, Breckinridge argued, had been the will of God. The coincidence between the proposal of the Thirteenth Amendment in Congress in January 1865 and the "complete overthrow of every rebel government" was too obvious to deny: "If there be such a thing as Divine Providence, I know not where we can look for a more signal manifestation of it." But his acceptance of the redemptive interpretation of the war, whereby America had secured its future through freeing the slaves, had not obliged Breckinridge to accept freed blacks as co-workers in the nation's new career. With the "order of Providence" as his witness, he insisted that racial differences were permanent and ineradicable; that there could be no benefit to Americans or humanity more generally from trying to erase them; and that without recognizing "the force of

that spirit of race,” especially as it related to white settlers and their efforts to found colonies, the “whole fatal history” of Indians and blacks in America became “inexplicable.”¹²⁷ Breckinridge attacked those Radical Republicans who sought to push beyond the Thirteenth Amendment, and he insisted that blacks needed an education not “for a futile contest for equal participation with the white race” but for a “comfortable existence” in a subordinate role to whites. They might be spread very thinly throughout the United States; or, “if these two races could be separated territorially from each other, . . . a solution the most beneficent of all would be obtained.” Breckinridge asked his audience for license to “reiterate what I have taught so long, that a powerful and civilized State within the tropics has been the one crying necessity of the human race from the dawn of history.” Perhaps black Americans could now be persuaded to create one, he mused.

Breckinridge’s ideas were controversial in 1865. The editors at the *Living Age* indicated their own willingness to accept black suffrage and declared that the votes of “the five blackest men in the country” would be more welcome than those of Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and the other disgraced Confederate leaders. But the survival of Breckinridge’s sharp views about racial inequality, grounded in a notion that God had ordained racial difference even as he had insisted on emancipation, gives some indication of the problem facing those with more ambitious plans for Reconstruction. The *Living Age* editors maintained that they would circulate the Breckinridge speech to inform the country of the “reasons and reasoning of *all* true patriots,” with a view toward reaching some consensus on Reconstruction that would “have the hearty concurrence of all.” The spur of a wrathful providentialism, which had corralled many reluctant northerners into accepting the need for emancipation during the war, had retreated from view. If a consensus could not be found on Reconstruction, the *Living Age* suggested, Americans should be “willing to stand still, till that Divine Providence, which has so far led us by ways which we knew not, shall clear the path to our sight.”¹²⁸ Unfortunately, the course of providence led white Americans away from their responsibility to their black compatriots after 1865. During the war, George Cheever had foreseen “the greatest boon ever conferred upon us by Divine Providence” if Americans could rid themselves of slavery; Abraham Lincoln pledged that abolition would vindicate American history and secure an “inconceivably grand” future for the nation. These promises placed the hard work of racial reconciliation in the past rather than the future and hardly prepared Americans for the challenges ahead.

¹²⁷ “The Great Deliverance and the New Career,” *Littell’s Living Age*, September 30, 1865, 577–92.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 592.

William Lloyd Garrison's Complaint

In the first weeks of 1865, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* asked the New York minister Samuel Osgood to reflect on the meaning of the war and the prospects for the future. Osgood, who presided over the Unitarian Church of the Messiah on Broadway, had written regularly for *Harper's* during the war. In 1862 he had identified the black presence in America as "the great stumbling block in the way of the nation."¹ The following year, he fretted about the outcome of the conflict, and even suggested that "our religion does not enable us to write history in advance." (He tempered this with the accompanying instruction that Americans should continue to hope for "the accomplishment of our providential destiny.")² As the war moved toward its conclusion in early 1865, with Lincoln returned to the White House, Osgood became more confident about the effects of the conflict upon the American people. They had been compelled to recognize an "organic relation" between the individual and the nation – a bond so intuitive that even schoolchildren could understand it, though it baffled the most distinguished Europeans. The war had demonstrated that the United States was not "an arbitrary compact or optional partnership," but instead "a providential evolution and a solemn covenant." The only cloud on the horizon was America's black population, which threatened the reunion between North and South. "Precisely what is to be done with the negro we do not profess to say," Osgood admitted, but he took comfort from the fact that northerners were "as free from negromania as from negrophobia." They accepted the "defects" and the "excellences" of black people, and were keen to let them "find [their] own level" in the postwar South.³

Northern "moderates" like Osgood soon discovered that there was to be no level playing field for freed blacks in the former Confederacy. Andrew Johnson,

¹ Samuel Osgood, "Victory," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 25, no. 146 (July 1862): 265–70, at 268.

² Osgood, "Our Prophets," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 26, no. 154 (March 1863): 526–31, at 531.

³ Osgood, "Our Lessons in Statesmanship," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 30, no. 178 (March 1865): 475–81, at 476, 477.

claiming affinity with Lincoln's cautious course in the last months of his life, vetoed the efforts of congressional Republicans to redistribute land to freed slaves in the summer of 1865. With Johnson's blessing, former Confederates were allowed to reorganize local government throughout the South and were rewarded for their nominal loyalty to the Union with the right to enact Black Codes that severely circumscribed the freedom of former slaves. Even northern moderates found this difficult to swallow, and the combination of Johnson's bullishness and an utterly unreconstructed southern racism briefly secured a large northern audience for the views of Thaddeus Stevens and the other Radical Republicans. The Radicals succeeded partly by persuading moderate Republicans and the northern public at large that the new "loyal" governments of the South were in effect the same disloyal governments that had so recently devastated the nation. They were helped in this characterization by the unapologetically extreme racism of Johnson and other southerners.⁴

The Radical Republican senator Lot Morrill of Maine, speaking in the stormy congressional debates over Reconstruction in the spring of 1866, looked back upon the Civil War with a jaded eye. Although Morrill had witnessed a good deal of self-congratulation about how white Americans had "assisted the slaves to their freedom," he failed to see much evidence for it. Lincoln, he insisted, had delayed emancipation until the very last moment, when he "came to realize that God in His providence did not intend that this nation should secure its own independence until it yielded the rights of the black." When the moment came, Lincoln had presented it not "as a measure of justice and humanity to the oppressed, but as helping ourselves to victory."⁵ The Radicals in Congress, along with those black and white abolitionists who continued to press for black rights, fought tirelessly to secure this justice and humanity. They were helped by the sheer extent of southern obduracy, which allowed Morrill to argue with good reason that blacks would be turned over to their former masters unless the federal government mounted an extensive and prolonged intervention in southern affairs.

⁴ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 271–80. Heather Cox Richardson has argued that most Republicans had rejected their views of black inability by 1865, and that they were ready to believe that freed blacks might as readily benefit from "free labor ideology" as whites. She explains the collapse of this putative Republican optimism over the following decades by suggesting that blacks disappointed their northern backers by demanding privileges, rights, and services from government rather than transforming the South with the aid of free labor ideology alone. Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865–1901* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001). This ingenious interpretation offers an important complement to earlier interpretations of the failure of Reconstruction, though it exaggerates the depth of northern (or even Republican) commitment to black ability in 1865. In his account of the ultimate failure of federal enforcement, Xi Wang argues that Republicans could never reach consensus on the definition of freedom and equality for blacks. Wang, *The Trial of Democracy: Black Suffrage and Northern Republicans, 1860–1910* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 263.

⁵ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 39th Cong., 1st sess. (Senate), March 8, 1866, 156.

Andrew Johnson himself became a very visible example of the dangers of conservative Reconstruction. Although Johnson had stood with the Union rather than with his native state of Tennessee in 1861, his determination to promote racial supremacy from the White House led him into an easy alliance with former Confederates. Another prominent figure who had enraged his fellow southerners on the eve of the war was Hinton Rowan Helper, a North Carolina polemicist who became a national celebrity in 1857 with his book *The Impending Crisis*, which condemned slavery as a drag on the South's economic and social progress.⁶ After the war, Helper produced a series of astonishingly racist books claiming that God intended blacks to be annihilated, not just in the United States but around the world. (With a bizarre flourish, he declared that on the disappearance of the last nonwhite, "in the twinkling of an eye, after the whole world shall have been peopled exclusively by the whites, the millennium will dawn – but not till then!")⁷ Prejudice of this kind, like Johnson's artless intransigence in the White House, was actively harmful to the cause of white supremacy.

The proponents of racial justice in America faced wiliier foes than Johnson and Helper in the years after 1865. During the war itself, abolitionists had succeeded in aligning the northern cause with their long-standing commitment to black freedom: the southern defenders of slavery had broken away from the United States and had attempted to construct their own understanding of God's plan for the Confederacy. Yet even before the victory at Appomattox, the abolitionists had begun to lose their power. In the speeches of Abraham Lincoln and the pages of *Harper's Magazine*, Americans were assured that emancipation itself had secured their glorious destiny. Lincoln and other moderates had used a popular and deep-rooted American conviction – that God had a special mission for the United States – to trump a widespread northern racism, which had, before 1861, seemed quite comfortable with the maintenance of southern slavery. During the war, the abolitionists discovered that the resumption of America's triumphant career had been conditioned upon an extremely limited conception of black freedom. With white Americans assured that they had discharged their duties to blacks and to God via abolition, there was little appetite

⁶ Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (New York: Burdick Brothers, 1857). On the book's influence, see Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 732–34; Hugh C. Bailey, *Hinton Rowan Helper, Abolitionist-Racist* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1965); and George M. Fredrickson, "Hinton Rowan Helper, Antislavery Racist," in Fredrickson, ed., *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequality* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 28–53.

⁷ Helper, *Nojoque: A Question for a Continent* (New York: George W. Carleton & Co., 1867), 212. See also Helper, *The Negroes in Negroland; The Negroes in America; and Negroes Generally; also the Several Races of White Men, Considered as the Involuntary and Predestined Supplanters of the Black Races* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868). George M. Fredrickson, while recognizing that Helper's racism was "excessive," has argued that the "milder version" in circulation in the North as well as the South was "one of the reasons for the failure of Radical Reconstruction." Fredrickson, "Hinton Rowan Helper," 51.

after 1865 for a new round of reflection about providential justice and the fault lines of American society.

If white southerners had publicly embraced the extreme views of Hinton Rowan Helper, perhaps northern radicals would have enjoyed more success in reminding Americans of the wrathful God who had originally inspired their abolitionist campaign. Instead, the most prominent southern thinkers in the years after 1865 took a more subtle approach as they looked to reconcile their belief in racial supremacy with the northern victory. A number of these southerners achieved national fame by eschewing the harshest forms of racism (and their own separatist experiment) and endorsing historical providentialism for the restored United States. They assured northerners that they now accepted the providential integrity of American history – which had been threatened by secession – even as they guarded the right of white southerners to organize their society along racial lines. The challenge for these post-Confederate providential interpreters was to bring the white southern interest in subordinating blacks and the white northern antipathy toward racial equality into a lasting equilibrium.⁸ To the horror of many abolitionists, this proved to be a remarkably simple undertaking. A new blend of racism and reconciliation promoted emancipation as providential while distorting the historical record of slavery in America, and the erstwhile abolitionists – even at the moment of their triumph – were unable to check its progress.

I. Providence and the New South

The pioneer in this reconciliation effort was the Virginia journalist Edward Pollard, who chronicled the Civil War from a southern perspective in a number of instant histories published in Confederate Richmond. After two bouts

⁸ For a general account of the cultural processes of reunion that bound together whites even as they marginalized nonwhites in the decades after 1865, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001). In discussing the reunion rhetoric of prominent southerners, we can usefully distinguish between a nationalism that was articulated by southerners at least partly for northern consumption; and a nostalgia or sentimentalism toward the memory of the Confederacy that was perpetrated by and for southerners alone. The former advanced loyalty to the nation in the hope of preserving a social and political space in which white southerners could govern themselves and their former slaves; the latter provided historical and cultural ballast for this experiment in self-rule. I would concur, then, with Gaines M. Foster's argument that Edward A. Pollard was relatively marginal in the southern production and consumption of "lost cause" mythology, though Pollard, Atticus Haygood, and Henry W. Grady were pivotal figures in securing that social and political space in which the "lost cause" was celebrated after 1870. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 49. The processes of reconstructing a southern identity and writing southern history after 1865 are described in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). Brundage examines the role of white male historians, dedicated to racial supremacy, in the shaping of public history at 105–37, but the achievement of his book is to place this selective remembering in the context of the historical and cultural practices of blacks, women, and nonelite southerners more generally.

of captivity in Union prisons, and the excruciating experience of defeat, Pollard published a best-selling apologia for the South entitled *The Lost Cause* (1866).⁹ Pollard's early postwar work was marked by a caustic rejectionism: although he accepted that the Confederacy and slavery could not be restored, he openly attacked the idea of racial equality and promised to resist anyone who would impose this upon the South. Two years later, in *The Lost Cause Regained* (1868), Pollard took a different course. Now he maintained that the entire purpose of slavery was to prevent a war between the races in America, and that Radical Reconstruction would surely inaugurate this conflict. Conjuring this horrible scene, Pollard invited northern whites to ally with their former antagonists in the South against the threat of black revolution. Pollard's confrontational tone was unaltered from his earlier book, but the lines were now drawn along racial rather than sectional lines. Pollard even defined the Lost Cause in explicitly Unionist terms: its "true and logical expression" was "the Union, as it was," he argued. Reassuring his northern readers that his racial Unionism was sincere, the final section of his book was entitled "The Growth and Greatness of America."¹⁰

Pollard pointed the nation toward a form of reunion that limited the rights of blacks and laundered the motives, if not the actions, of the Confederacy. Before his death in 1872, he prepared two long articles for the *Galaxy*, a New York magazine that became one of the most popular periodicals in the nation during Reconstruction. Pollard used this platform to continue his rehabilitation of the South, though again he changed tack by accepting some measure of black freedom. The first article, entitled "The Romance of the Negro," appeared in October 1871. All of the former Confederate states had been readmitted to the Union, the first black senator had been elected in Mississippi (to Jefferson Davis's old seat), and the Ku Klux Klan was at the height of its influence. Pollard struck a conciliatory tone. He praised the "tenderness" of blacks and

⁹ Edward A. Pollard, *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* (New York: E. B. Treat & Co., 1866). The idea of Pollard as a bridge between the Old and New South – a defender of slavery not because of the inherent virtues of the institution, but because of its contributions to preserving white supremacy – appealed immensely to Ulrich B. Phillips; see, especially, "The Central Theme of Southern History," *American Historical Review* 34, no. 1 (1928): 30–43, at 40–41. Jack P. Maddex Jr. has challenged this view, and suggests that the "second-class citizenship" that Pollard envisaged for blacks was a "remarkable advance" on his previous views of black ability. Maddex, *The Reconstruction of Edward A. Pollard*, *The James Sprunt Studies in History and Political Science*, vol. 54 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), 52. If Phillips saw Pollard as a vital link between an Old and New South dedicated to an extreme form of white supremacy, Maddex presents him as reconciling former Confederates to a conservative Unionism, which was itself based on second-class citizenship for blacks. My interpretation here follows Maddex – especially in his emphasis on the significant changes in Pollard's thought during the 1860s and 1870s – though I suggest that the difference between a southern white supremacy and a national commitment to second-class citizenship for blacks is unsettlingly slight.

¹⁰ Pollard, *The Lost Cause Regained* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), 207, 198; and Maddex, 60.

suggested that their former masters had come to realize the benefits of black freedom. He chided those who predicted that blacks would find “a fate similar to that of the red man” and praised the industriousness of the freedmen. What Pollard was looking for in exchange for this thesis on “the regeneration of the African” was an acknowledgment from the North that slavery “may have done a providential part in educating the negro to that point whence he was likely to advance rather than to retrograde and fall back into comparative barbarism.” This recognition would allow white southerners to accept the passing of slavery but to feel proud that it had, for more than two centuries, been an “aid in the cause of human progress.” The idea that God had removed slavery only when “its mission [was] performed” led Pollard to an unusual sectional compromise: “Let the Northern man on his side confess that slavery did improve the negro in the past, . . . and let the Southern man . . . admit that the negro since release from slavery has continued to improve.” Rather fancifully, Pollard imagined that blacks themselves would “testify to each” of these arguments.¹¹

Just before his death in December 1872, Pollard finished another article for the *Galaxy* that further developed this idea of a providential reunion over slavery. Pollard claimed to have found “a chapter of American history not yet written” on the “Anti-Slavery men of the South.” Emboldened, perhaps, by his earlier piece for the magazine, he now argued that northern abolitionists had unfairly monopolized credit for the fight against slavery. It was actually southerners who had pioneered the cause of abolition through a “purer and honester” form of antislavery than the detached and vengeful Ultras of New England. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Henry Clay, James Madison, and a host of other southern luminaries had been placed in the impossible position of recognizing slavery to be an evil but realizing that blacks were not ready for freedom. Pollard admitted that these men, who “had no gift of advertising themselves” (unlike northern abolitionists), faded from view in the South in the 1850s and during the war itself. Before 1850, though, they had constituted a southern conscience that saw slavery and freedom as progressive phases in the same process of racial improvement.

Again, Pollard insisted that “slavery had fulfilled its mission,” and once more he invited northern readers to endorse the view of both slavery and antislavery as providentially decreed:

It has naturally required some time for the South to draw the lesson implied in the actual consequences of the liberation of the negro, and to trace out the beautiful order of Providence, which has proved alike the benefits of slavery and the benefits of emancipation,

¹¹ Pollard, “The Romance of the Negro,” *The Galaxy* 12, no. 4 (October 1871): 470–78, at 471, 470, 473. Pollard’s goal here – to persuade a northern audience that slavery had been providentially determined, at least before 1860 – had been adopted by former Confederates even during the war. See, for instance, the speech at Cooper Institute in New York by Edward W. Gantt, the former Confederate general from Arkansas, in February 1864. “Hon. E. W. Gantt,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1864, 2. Gantt told the “very large audience” that “Negro slavery was the instrument in the hands of Providence to accomplish a particular mission”: the settlement of the “miasmatic country” of the South.

each in its appointed time and sphere. There has been similar hesitation on the part of the North to perceive that the success of emancipation was the success of slavery, and to divine therefrom its own peculiar lesson of charity and confession. The anti-slavery men of the South were right in their time, and the anti-slavery men of the North were right – not in that time in which they most loudly proclaimed themselves, but in that time in which Providence had appointed them to act. There was a period in which slavery was to be conserved, for it was then doing its great God-appointed work (and that which the North now is forced to especially acknowledge) of making the negro truly fit for freedom.

Thus the nation's leading historian of the Lost Cause spent his last days sketching a "standpoint of observation" upon which both sections of the Union could unite: "We see now the visible footprints of Providence, and a way so clear that there should no longer be a shadow of misconstruction or of debate on the history of anti-slavery in America." The South had always been committed to the welfare of blacks, with the exception of a decade or two in which it lost its bearings, and it could now continue the mission that it had begun with the institution of slavery.¹²

Pollard's strange journey from racial bitterness in 1866 to historical redemption in 1872 has an antiquarian feel. As he intensified his efforts to unify North and South around the idea that emancipation was the providential sequel to slavery, he came to care more for the reputation of the South than for the battle that was raging between blacks and whites in the former Confederacy for the privileges of citizenship.¹³ But as it became clear that northern commitment to the rights of southern blacks was less durable than the determination of southern whites to deny those rights, Pollard's project was taken up by another prominent southerner who addressed the nation on the meaning of southern history. Atticus Haygood, who had been a Confederate chaplain during the war, thereafter helped to organize Sunday schools in Tennessee before becoming the president of Emory College in 1875. Haygood gained the attention of many northern educators by transforming Emory, and he began to write about educational, religious, and social matters for the southern religious press.¹⁴ In 1880 he preached a Thanksgiving Day sermon entitled "The New South"

¹² Pollard, "The Anti-Slavery Men of the South," *The Galaxy* 16, no. 3 (September 1873): 329–41, at 329, 330, 335, 339.

¹³ Maddex, 74–76, has suggested that Pollard's motive was to persuade blacks themselves to look to southern conservatives as better protectors of their interest than the "negrophobic" northern Republicans who had masterminded abolitionism and Reconstruction. (This interpretation would also explain Pollard's interest in presenting the lions of the southern political tradition as effectively antislavery, excepting the temporary misstep of the two decades before 1865.) Although Pollard may have been interested in persuading his fellow Democrats to adopt this strategy in winning black votes, the effect of his articles in national magazines like the *Galaxy* was more likely to reassure northern readers of the existence of an enlightened, white political class that was committed to Unionism and to a moderate form of white supremacy. The same could be said of Atticus Haygood, Henry W. Grady, and the other pioneers of the New South on the national stage.

¹⁴ Harold W. Mann, *Atticus Greene Haygood: Methodist Bishop, Editor and Educator* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1965). George M. Fredrickson discusses Haygood's contribution to

that rehearsed many of Pollard's arguments about the providential legibility of southern history.¹⁵ The sermon caught the eye of New York railroad tycoon George Seney, who paid for ten thousand copies to be printed and circulated throughout the nation. Haygood reached a bigger audience even than Pollard and expanded his thesis into a book, *Our Brother in Black*, which was published in New York the following year.¹⁶

Our Brother in Black, like Pollard's *Galaxy* articles, insisted that emancipation had been good for the South. Slavery was an inferior labor system, and both blacks and whites would benefit from its abolition. Future generations of southerners, he predicted, would see their defeat as a providential deliverance for white southerners as well as for blacks. Haygood also dismissed suggestions that the black population could be colonized in Africa or Central America, or that the mass of southern blacks would follow the thousands who fled to Kansas in 1879 and 1880. Like Pollard, Haygood balanced these concessions with some ambitious claims of his own about southern history. God had ordained southern slavery, he insisted: "Christianizing them was the grand providential design in their coming to this country." Blacks needed the protection of a "stronger race" to develop, and they received this through generations of servitude. Offering the counterexample of Native Americans, Haygood asked his readers to imagine what would have happened if 100,000 blacks had come to America in 1620 and had been given their freedom. They would have met the same terrible end as the Indians, he argued, which proved that slavery was God's way of preserving the race until it was ready for freedom.¹⁷

Haygood's method in all this was simple. If North and South could agree upon the providential basis for both slavery and emancipation, they would find a narrative of reunion that would marginalize extremists on both sides – and which would help both sections to resolve outstanding racial issues. Neo-Confederates would be deterred from exhuming proslavery arguments, and northern radicals could be prevented from indulging their "Pharisaical" attitudes toward the South. Haygood attached a political program to this scheme for reconciliation: a discreet system of racial segregation in which religion, education, and numerous forms of social interaction between the races were forbidden or heavily circumscribed. Crucially, miscegenation should be recognized as a violation of providence. What would have become of the Israelites in the Bible, Haygood asked, if they had mingled with their Egyptian captors before God permitted their exodus? In apparent recognition that this bewildering analogy might not convince his audience, Haygood tried a different tactic:

the "new paternalism" of the New South in *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 198–227.

¹⁵ Atticus G. Haygood, *The New South: Gratitude, Amendment, Hope. A Thanksgiving Sermon for November 25, 1880* (Oxford, Ga.: [n.p.], 1880).

¹⁶ The circumstances of the sermon's publication are recounted in Haygood, *The New South*, ed. Judson C. Ward (Atlanta: Emory University Library, 1950), viii.

¹⁷ Haygood, *Our Brother in Black: His Freedom and His Future* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1881), 31, 34, 32.

"A good deal has been said at random, and in a declamatory way, about the iniquity of caste." But "if God had designed any such commingling of bloods as would issue in one conglomerate race, there never would have been any [racist] sentiment or instinct in the human breast." Haygood was willing to recognize and even to celebrate emancipation and the defeat of the Confederacy as providential blessings, but in turn he asked the nation to acknowledge that segregation and racial prejudice had also been ordained by God.¹⁸

Couching all this in a national narrative that reconciled slavery and emancipation and (like Pollard) pledging the South to the achievement of America's national destiny, Haygood received glowing reviews from his northern audience.¹⁹ He also laid the ground for that "New South" that denounced slavery as vehemently as it insisted upon racial discrimination. Henry W. Grady, the Atlanta newspaper editor who did more to promote the idea of the New South than perhaps any other southerner in the 1880s, spread Haygood's thinking in a series of lectures in America's major cities.²⁰ He celebrated the removal of slavery as providential, but he insisted that the South's "hope and assurance" lay in "the clear and unmistakable domination of the white race." He defended the fact of black suffrage, but insisted that the "universal verdict of racial history" demanded separation and white supremacy. Behind all this was a familiar commitment to America's providential mission. "I always bet on sunshine in America," Grady told a Virginia crowd in 1889, before enthusiastically endorsing Emerson's old boast that "our whole history looks like the last effort by Divine Providence in behalf of the human race."²¹

Grady, who died of pneumonia at the age of thirty-nine, made his last speech in December 1889 at the Hotel Vendome in Boston, where he shared the platform with Grover Cleveland and Andrew Carnegie. Lecturing on "the race

¹⁸ Ibid., 55, 31.

¹⁹ See, for instance, "New Books," *New York Times*, May 31, 1881, 3; "Literary," *Christian Advocate*, June 9, 1881, 4; and "Rev. Atticus G. Haygood," *Independent*, June 9, 1881, 11. Very few reviewers criticized Haygood's emphasis on the need for segregation, though it did not escape the notice of the Reverend J. D. Walsh, writing in the *Western Christian Advocate*, who criticized Haygood's tendency to present blacks as sharing the enthusiasm of southern whites for social separation. "Our Brother in Black," *Western Christian Advocate*, June 22, 1881, 193. The *Advocate* published a much more positive review on July 13, 1881, 217.

²⁰ The influence of Haygood upon Grady is noted by Judson C. Ward in his introduction to the reprint edition of Haygood, *The New South*, vii. Fredrickson, in *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 205, also emphasizes continuity of thinking between Grady and Haygood, noting that Haygood's ideas about race and southern society were shaped by the editorials printed in Grady's newspaper, the *Atlanta Constitution*, in the 1870s. See also Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 21. Grady's lectures are collected in *Life and Labors of Henry W. Grady, His Speeches, Writings, Etc.* (Atlanta: H. C. Hudgins & Co., 1890).

²¹ "Address Before the New England Society of New York City, December 22, 1886," in *Life and Labors of Henry W. Grady*, 114; "Address at the Texas State Fair in Dallas, October 27, 1888," in *ibid.*, 184–185; "Address Before the Merchant's Association of Boston, December 12, 1889," in *ibid.*, 253; and "Address at Charlottesville, June 24, 1889," in *ibid.*, 242.

problem,” he told the audience of four hundred businessmen that this was the only obstacle to the resumption of a glorious national destiny. The North should send emigrants to the South to crowd out the black influence and should appreciate the historical impossibility of racial equality or amalgamation. Northerners should not doubt the affection and esteem felt by southern whites for blacks, or the determination of southerners to uphold the Reconstruction amendments. (Grady here invoked “the spirit of my old black mammy” to witness a “love for that race [that] you cannot measure nor comprehend.”) With the racial problem removed, Americans could resume their “mighty duty” to “fight for human liberty.” American history, from Columbus to the present, was “a constant and expanding miracle” that would unite North and South and remind them of the nation’s sacred significance.²²

After receiving a rapturous response, Grady made a pilgrimage the following day to Plymouth Rock. According to his obituary in the *New York Times*, it was by lingering in the “raw atmosphere” there that Grady picked up the chill that killed him ten days later. But his providential unionism surpassed the efforts of Haygood and Pollard and persuaded northerners that the leaders of the New South were racially responsible and properly committed to the mission of the United States.²³ Atticus Haygood, meanwhile, outlived Grady by five years, but found himself isolated as discrimination and racial violence in the South reached their bleak plateau. Assailed on one side by a virulent white racism that rejected his paternalist approach to blacks and on the other by the limited results of his uplift schemes, he left Georgia in 1887 for Ohio, then Alabama, and finally Los Angeles. Falling into ill health beside the Pacific, he returned to Georgia in 1893 and struggled with debts and alcoholism until his death three years later.²⁴ As he wrote his final articles in these diminished circumstances, he developed an idea that Grady himself had thrown out in his 1889 address in Boston. If the problem of racial relations seemed intractable, Grady had suggested, the South should be given a generous period in which to solve it: “We simply report progress and ask for your patience.” In 1895 Haygood molded a similar sentiment into one final providential consolation. “We are in a hurry about everything,” he wrote in a Methodist journal. “But God is not in haste about anything.” Providence would eventually intervene and resolve the racial difficulties that had clouded the New South’s development; until then, “it will be clear gain to Christian America to keep in mind that the negro problem calls for faith in time and the God over all who determines all times and seasons.” Those whites and blacks who remained dissatisfied with the compromises developed by Pollard,

²² “Cleveland and Grady,” *Washington Post*, December 13, 1889, 1; and “Address Before the Merchant’s Association of Boston,” 251, 272, 253, 269, 273. The anonymous editor of *Life and Labors of Henry W. Grady*, 244, claimed that this Boston address was “published in full in nearly every daily newspaper of any standing.”

²³ “Henry W. Grady’s Death,” *New York Times*, December 24, 1889, 5. The *Times* described Grady as “one of the South’s most brilliant sons.”

²⁴ Mann, 200–11.

Haygood, and the other proponents of a New South had simply to wait for the providential scheme to reveal itself in all its beauty.²⁵

2. "The Sacred Significance of This War"

The radical abolitionists found themselves in an unusual situation by 1864. After decades in which Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and their allies had been dismissed as fanatics, they were now embraced by newspapers and politicians for their foresight. But there was growing division within their ranks about the political and providential meaning of the northern cause. In 1864 Wendell Phillips, George Cheever, and other radicals had effectively divided the American Anti-Slavery Society by supporting John Frémont's abortive presidential bid. In the same year, Abraham Lincoln had been embraced by Garrison and Douglass, both of whom were willing to overlook his colonization dalliance and to capitalize on his image as the "great emancipator." By the spring of 1865, Garrison himself became a mascot for the idea that slavery had been eradicated. He was invited to attend the carefully choreographed flag-raising ceremony at Fort Sumter on April 14, 1865, and northern newspapers carried excited reports of his visit to John Calhoun's grave in Charleston. Slavery, Garrison supposedly remarked, had gone to an even deeper resting place than Calhoun, without possibility of resurrection.²⁶

In May 1865 the American Anti-Slavery Society held its annual meeting in George Cheever's church on Broadway. The attendance was so large that the meeting was moved from the vestry into the church itself; when the crowd was seated, William Lloyd Garrison, the president, immediately moved to dissolve the society. Praising God and noting the "wonders he has wrought," Garrison declared that "the year of jubilee is come" and that the abolitionists had made themselves obsolete. His joyous tone provoked an angry response. Wendell Phillips and his allies strongly denied that the work of abolition was over. They were joined by Frederick Douglass, who shared Garrison's sympathetic view of Lincoln but who believed that the society should continue to agitate. Garrison tried to make himself heard above the recriminations. The talk of his opponents was positively funereal, he complained: "A funeral, because Abolitionism

²⁵ Atticus G. Haygood, "The Negro Problem: God Takes Time – Man Must," *Methodist Quarterly Review* 42 (September–October 1895): 41–53. Ralph E. Luker has noted that, while "Haygood's appeal to time as redemptive was a word of sacred wisdom in race relations, . . . the hand of God is not always immediately apparent in human history." Luker also recalls Martin Luther King Jr.'s frustration with the "mythical concept of time" in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in April 1963. Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 119–22.

²⁶ On the splits within the abolitionist movement, see James M. McPherson, *The Struggle For Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964). On Garrison's visit to Charleston in April 1865, see "The Fort Sumter Rejoicing," *Chicago Tribune*, April 22, 1865, 2; and "A Trip to Fort Sumter," *New York Evangelist*, April 27, 1865, 1.

sweeps the nation! Nay, thanks be to God who giveth us the victory, it is a day of jubilee! . . . It is a resurrection from the dead, rather; it is an ascension and beatification!" But the meeting leaned more toward Phillips than Garrison: there was much work to be done to secure black rights, declared the majority of the speakers. Garrison, whispered some, was an "old foggy" who would rather enjoy the limelight than complete the difficult work of reform. When put to the vote, 118 delegates stood with Phillips, and only 48 with Garrison. The majority immediately proposed that their president be reelected, but Garrison sensed a trick and resigned.²⁷

Over the next decade or so, the abolitionists struggled not only with each other but with their responsibilities to God, to blacks, and to the nation. Did the victories of 1865 – over the Confederacy at Appomattox and over slavery in the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment by the states – suggest that God had regenerated the United States? Garrison, Douglass, and Phillips had largely dissented from historical providentialism before 1861 and had invited scorn from white Americans by declaring that God would humble the nation for slavery rather than sustain its spectacular career. The war presented an enormous opportunity to these erstwhile promoters of the providentialism of wrath. Not only could they present their earlier radicalism as prophetic, but they might direct the vast moral momentum of the Civil War toward their own political ends. Garrison pleaded with Phillips and his supporters to take advantage of abolitionism's newfound respectability. It would be a huge mistake for abolitionists to closet themselves from the American people when their ideas had become almost universal: "Let us mingle with the mass," he insisted in May 1865 at the fractious meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society.²⁸ When he tried to wind up the New England Anti-Slavery Society the following year, he presented "the sure purpose of a victorious and determined nation" and "the resistless might of the Eternal Providence" as collateral against slavery's re-emergence. (He lost this vote as well.) Garrison did not expect God to do all the work in removing the final vestiges of slavery from American society, but he seemed finally to have detected a progressive course in the nation's development. "I am no optimist," he told a packed crowd in Brooklyn in March 1866. "I am not for counseling inaction, nor relaxing in vigilance, because assured that God will, at some time or other, accomplish his great designs. But I know in whom I have believed, and as He has not failed in the past, so He may be safely trusted in the future."²⁹

The idea that God had preserved and purified the United States became an opportunity and a trap for abolitionists after 1865. Should they affirm that providence had indeed given the United States a special mission for the world's redemption, and that the abolition of slavery had removed the most important obstacle to this? Or should they cling to abstract principles of justice and

²⁷ *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, May 20, 1865, 1–4; *Liberator*, May 19, 1865, 78.

²⁸ *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, May 20, 1865, 2.

²⁹ "Liberty Victorious," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, March 10, 1866, 1.

continue to threaten divine wrath if the nation reneged on the promise of black freedom? In the summer of 1866, as abolitionists took stock of Andrew Johnson's increasingly malevolent views on Reconstruction, Gerrit Smith warned readers of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* about the pitfalls of the second approach: "I know how vain it has ever been for an Abolitionist to speak discouragingly to the American people of the future." Smith recalled the many audiences who had laughed at his own predictions of national doom before 1860, and he recognized the lure of the alternative: "A few smooth prophecies from the lips of a demagogue outweigh all that all the Abolitionists could say to the contrary."³⁰ Some of Smith's fellow abolitionists took his advice and tried to fold their visions of Radical Reconstruction into a progressive scheme for the nation's history. Others resisted the temptation and continued to argue without apology for a bleak national future if racial justice was not secured.

George Cheever did more than any other radical abolitionist to popularize the idea that historical and judicial providentialism could be fused through emancipation: it was Cheever who kept his faith in America's redemptive potential, and who assured anxious audiences in New York and Washington during the war's first year that this great destiny could be secured through abolition. But as he became aware of the hollowness of his interpretive victory – with congressmen and editorial writers extolling emancipation, segregation, and black removal as providential – Cheever chose to emphasize the continuing threat of God's wrath rather than to join in William Lloyd Garrison's jubilee.³¹ In 1864 he excoriated Lincoln for his timid conception of Reconstruction and insisted that "we cannot be saved in defiance of the attributes of God."³² Although Cheever was a little more generous to Lincoln after his death, he never abandoned his belief that the nation had been forced into abolition by God. Americans could neither take credit for their actions nor assume that emancipation vouchsafed their great destiny. "The Almighty made it necessary that we should either abolish slavery or bid adieu to the American Union," he declared in a sermon in May 1865. God was still poised to punish Americans for injustice: if "we remodel a single State Constitution, and interpolate the word white or the word black, we open the way for again delivering the nation to another storm of Divine wrath."³³

Cheever's renewed devotion to judicial providentialism did not entirely marginalize him in the postwar years. In 1868 he was invited back to the House of Representatives by Radical Republicans to reprise his wartime addresses,

³⁰ "Letter from Gerrit Smith," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, August 4, 1866, 2.

³¹ See, for instance, Cheever's "The Crime of Compromise with Slavery," *Independent*, March 6, 1862, 1; and "The Great Question and the Great Peril," *Independent*, April 24, 1862, 2.

³² "Dr. Cheever's Final Letter," *Independent*, August 11, 1864, 1.

³³ "Right of the Colored Race to a Representative Government," *New York Times*, May 8, 1865, 8. On Cheever's eulogy to Lincoln, see Robert M. York, *George B. Cheever, Religious and Social Reformer, 1807–1890*, University of Maine Studies, 2nd ser., no. 69 (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1955), 201.

and he discoursed on God's "ministry of wrath" before another "very large audience," which included many of the champions of Radical Reconstruction.³⁴ But his dogged rhetoric on black rights and national dangers was unpopular in New York City, and Cheever's grand Church of the Pilgrims, unable to pay its ground rent, was forced to close in 1867. "We could have held our present citadel had we kept silent," Cheever protested. (He later blamed Lincoln, obliquely, for failing to change the hearts of ordinary Americans when he had the opportunity.)³⁵ His abolitionist colleague, William Henry Channing, identified broader forces pushing Cheever to the margins: "The fellow-feeling towards the black men," which had briefly made his friend a celebrity during the early 1860s, did not "last beyond the passions of the war." Cheever lost his pulpit, and his antislavery citadel on Union Square reopened in 1870 as the elegant headquarters of Tiffany & Company.³⁶

At the opposite extreme, the Methodist antislavery campaigner Gilbert Haven combined an insistence on black equality with an enthusiastic embrace of America's providential mission.³⁷ Haven had come to prominence in Methodist circles in the 1850s, and his fiery eulogy for John Brown brought him to a national audience. Grieving the death of his wife in 1862, he embarked on a tour of Europe and the Holy Land and was astounded at the lack of support for the American cause. In England, he met cynicism and apathy when he discussed the Civil War, and he was so shaken by the experience that he sent a letter of complaint to a London magazine. Writing from Paris on Independence Day, he lamented the "want of sympathy" among Britons for the Union effort. The United States, he insisted, had been lifted up by providence for the "benefit and blessing" of the world. God had intended the Civil War not only to give blacks their freedom but to establish the unity and equality of the human race.³⁸ When Haven returned to America the following year, he continued to promote the idea that the nation's providential significance was entirely bound up with the fate of its black inhabitants. While many antislavery preachers argued that the Civil War's outcome would determine the fate of the world, because it would either confirm or destroy American liberty, Haven was unusual in

³⁴ "Dr. Cheever Upon National Affairs," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, March 28, 1868, 1.

³⁵ York, 204. Cheever received \$78,000 for the church building, which helped to pay off its large debts and also to prepare for its merger with the Second Presbyterian Church of Harlem. But a new church building was not completed until 1873, by which time Cheever had retired to New Jersey and the national economic downturn had condemned the merged church to a new round of enormous debts. Cheever complained about Lincoln and the Republicans (who "lack the principle of justice, and the resolve to stand by it") in a private letter after he realized that he would lose the church building on Broadway; he permitted portions of this letter to be reprinted in *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, November 16, 1867, 2.

³⁶ Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Memoir of William Henry Channing* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, Lowrey & Co., 1887), 324.

³⁷ William B. Gravely, *Gilbert Haven, Methodist Abolitionist: A Study in Race, Religion and Reform, 1850-1880* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973).

³⁸ Gilbert Haven, *National Sermons: Sermons, Speeches and Letters on Slavery and Its War: From the Passage of the Fugitive Slave Bill to the Election of President Grant* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1869), 291-316, at 292, 306-7.

insisting on the centrality of racial justice (and of black people themselves) in this process.³⁹ By April 1865 he was assuring Boston audiences that blacks, rather than whites, were “the chosen people of God”; he confidently predicted that, within a decade, the white southern elite would beg black men for the hands of their daughters in marriage, because blacks would by then have “climb[ed] to the top of American society.”⁴⁰

Haven was frequently frustrated in his assertions of black equality. Although the Methodist Church elected him to the episcopacy in 1872, he was ridiculed for his beliefs and condemned for his emphasis on racial integration. Bizarrely, his ideas terminated in a full-throated endorsement of overseas expansion. In 1877 he traveled to Liberia and, in spite of the collapse of Reconstruction at home, confidently pronounced that the nation should be annexed to the United States. Acknowledging that this would create constitutional issues and would betray the spirit of the Monroe Doctrine, he nonetheless encouraged the readers of the *North American Review* to conceive of Liberia as “an integer of the World Republic” that would consummate American expansion.⁴¹ The same idea animated articles the following year on the need to absorb Mexico and Canada to the United States “as the beginning of the world union.”⁴²

A few months before his death, Haven delivered a spectacular Fourth of July oration in 1879 that upheld all the tenets of historical providentialism: God had reserved America for English settlement, he had protected the nation throughout its existence, and he was preparing to extend America's influence (and perhaps its sovereignty) across the world. Haven's resistless providential optimism never denied the importance of racial equality nor metastasized into a formal imperialism: the United States would expand “not by force, not by purchase, but [by] sweet inward compulsion.”⁴³ And yet he chose to emphasize the nation's redemptive power in spite of evidence to the contrary – from the problems he had encountered with his own denomination over racial integration, to the fate of the black Exodusters who were fleeing from the South even as he delivered his paean to overseas expansion. “To save ourselves we may be compelled to save others,” he had suggested in 1864.⁴⁴ But the resurgent expansionism of the 1880s and 1890s easily sidestepped the connection between racial justice in the United States and American ideas abroad. Haven may have affirmed the idea of a special destiny for America, but he was unable to harness this overseas mission to the fate of blacks at home.

³⁹ Haven, “The State a Christian Brotherhood,” April 2, 1863, in *ibid.*, 317–60; “The War and the Millennium,” November 26, 1863, in *ibid.*, 373–92; and “Why Grant Will Succeed,” May 15, 1864, in *ibid.*, 393–406.

⁴⁰ Haven, “Jefferson Davis and Pharaoh,” April 12, 1865, in *ibid.*, 529–50, at 531, 548–49.

⁴¹ Haven, “America in Africa, Part II,” *North American Review* 125, no. 259 (November–December 1877): 517–28, at 526.

⁴² Haven, “The Union of All America I,” *Independent*, December 5, 1878, 7; and “The Union of All America II,” *Independent*, December 12, 1878, 1.

⁴³ Haven, “The Nation of America,” *Independent*, July 10, 1879, 13.

⁴⁴ Haven, “The World War,” sermon preached on the Massachusetts Fast Day, April 4, 1864, in *National Sermons*, 438–72, at 469.

Haven's thinking seems unorthodox, but both Wendell Phillips and Frederick Douglass made similar efforts to ground America's providential meaning in racial equality. In 1865 Phillips had toured northern cities with a bleak lecture – entitled “The South Victorious” – warning against a lenient Reconstruction policy. (This irritated William Lloyd Garrison to such a degree that he wrote an address of his own, “Liberty Victorious,” to rebuke Phillips for his pessimism.)⁴⁵ Phillips was not as relentlessly negative as Garrison liked to suggest. In 1866 he informed audiences on several occasions that the eventual victory of equality and justice over racial prejudice was assured. (The question for Americans, he proposed, was whether this triumph would take place in four years or forty.)⁴⁶ In 1868 he adopted the same tactic that Gilbert Haven had employed since 1862, arguing that Reconstruction was integral to America's providential status. “Wherever you go, wherever you touch American history,” he told the delegates of the American Anti-Slavery Society at its New York annual meeting, “God has marked the relations of this race to ourselves as the test of American moral life – as the fulcrum and the lever of American political progress; and the cause in which we have been engaged for thirty years is, in other words, the protection of nationality.” Phillips could see this message on “the lips of Providence,” informing the American people that “only by being just shall you be strong.”⁴⁷ The notion of racial justice as a providential fulcrum enabled Phillips to present equality, rather than abolition, as the prerequisite for American progress. God had spoken in the clearest language, Phillips insisted, and now Americans had to heed his words: “There is the fulcrum on which you can move the universe. Unfortunately, it is black. Will you use it? If you do not, you cannot have any other.”⁴⁸

Phillips felt vindicated in March 1870 as Ulysses Grant signed the Fifteenth Amendment into law, and he briefly imagined that Garrison's faux jubilee of 1865 had finally materialized. Phillips dissolved the American Anti-Slavery Society, and advised his fellow abolitionists to diversify their political program to embrace women's suffrage, temperance, and a multitude of other reforms.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ McPherson, 367–69, discusses Phillips's prominence in the Reconstruction debates. On Garrison's address, see note 29.

⁴⁶ “The Philadelphia Convention,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, August 25, 1866, 2.

⁴⁷ “Annual Meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, May 23, 1868, 1.

⁴⁸ *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, June 6, 1868, 1.

⁴⁹ Ironically, Phillips supported the weaker version of the Fifteenth Amendment that had been proposed by the House of Representatives, rather than the Senate version that prohibited discrimination on the basis of education and property in addition to “race, color or condition of previous certitude.” The *Standard* had itself run an editorial warning of the likelihood of “invidious and unequal tests of property and education” if the stronger version was abandoned in committee, but Phillips fretted that the stronger wording would alienate states that already applied these tests – including Massachusetts. “The Senate – The Amendment,” *Standard*, February 13, 1869, 2; Phillips, “Congress,” *Standard*, February 20, 1869, 2. See also McPherson, 425–26. On the winding up of the American Anti-Slavery Society, see “American Anti-Slavery Society Commemorative Meeting,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, April 16, 1870, 1–3.

But, like Gilbert Haven, Phillips failed to persuade Americans more generally that God would condition the future prosperity of the nation upon the abandonment of prejudice and discrimination. When he insisted on the need for civil rights legislation during an 1874 address at Faneuil Hall, he was booed from the stage. Phillips spent much of his retirement worrying that the legacy (and even the memory) of abolitionism would fade from view. He lived long enough to witness the death of most of his abolitionist colleagues, and he labored to ensure that the letters, papers, and journals of the antislavery movement – the raw materials for an honest assessment of the nation's history – would be preserved for future generations of Americans who might be more interested in the cause of abolition than his contemporaries.⁵⁰

In 1881 he was invited back to Harvard to address the Phi Beta Kappa Society, some fifty years after he had last given a speech there (at his own commencement ceremony). Phillips combined an exceptionalist view of American history with an insistence on reform and reformers as providential instruments. In reviewing America's first century, Phillips could confidently state that "the history of the world has no such chapter in its breadth, its depth, its significance, or its bearing on future history." Americans had simply to recognize that "agitations" – of the kind that he and William Lloyd Garrison had pioneered – were not obstacles to national progress but "the opportunities and the means God offers us to refine the taste, mould the character, lift the purpose, and educate the moral sense of the masses." Phillips would not hold ordinary Americans responsible for the failures of reform, in the North or the South; instead he castigated national leaders who had been too slow or too cowardly to direct the populace at large. He was unwilling to dispense with the idea that American history was progressive, insisting that the nation had embarked on the second century of its existence "stronger than ever."⁵¹

Frederick Douglass also grappled with the providential meaning of abolition, though he reached a very different conclusion about God's influence over the world than many of his peers. Since his escape from slavery in Maryland in 1838, Douglass had been bombarded with providential speculation about the place of blacks in America. The American Colonization Society had detected a divine impulse to "relocate" the black population in Liberia and had presented American slavery as God's chosen instrument for the redemption of Africa. Proslavery ministers in the southern states had used the biblical story of Noah's curse to justify the perpetual enslavement of blacks. Northern moderates had criticized abolitionists for their zeal and had piously delegated antislavery activity to God. Douglass listened keenly to this clamor, and in a modest way he added to it: in the early 1850s, he had argued that God would punish the United

⁵⁰ James Brewer Stewart, *Wendell Phillips: Liberty's Hero* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 315–19.

⁵¹ Stewart, 322–28; Phillips, "The Scholar in a Republic," in Phillips, *Speeches, Lectures and Letters, Second Series* (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1891), 330–64, at 337, 350–51.

States for slavery.⁵² The religious elements in his rhetoric have persuaded some historians that Douglass had a providential understanding of the world, even that he welcomed the Civil War as an apocalyptic event.⁵³

His speeches after 1861, and the articles printed in his Rochester newspaper, *Douglass' Monthly*, present a different story. Douglass certainly recognized the rhetorical power of providential thinking. In February 1862, in an address at Cooper Institute in New York, he claimed that "the allotments of Providence seem to make the black man of America the open book out of which the American people are to learn lessons of wisdom, power and goodness."⁵⁴ (Douglass may have inspired Gilbert Haven's argument that racial harmony was the providential key to American history.) But throughout the war, Douglass complained repeatedly about the use of providentialism to evade or postpone difficult decisions about slavery. He was particularly appalled by the record of the northern churches, which had "piously and psalm-singingly committed all into the hands of the Lord, and branded Abolitionists as great sinners because they have refused to do the same."⁵⁵ The resurgence of colonization thinking also discredited the providential idiom, and Douglass complained bitterly about white efforts to present the "base passions" of racial prejudice as "inevitable ordinations of Divine Providence," which necessitated black removal.⁵⁶ Even the practice of fasting raised his ire. On the September 1861 fast day, Douglass was willing to allow that sermons and supplications might inspire the people who produced them, but he insisted that "the day of miracles is past" and that Americans would have to "answer . . . their own prayers."⁵⁷

In January 1864 Douglass delivered another speech in New York, entitled "The Mission of the War," and rejected the idea that providence had absolved Americans of their political responsibilities. Some people had already argued that slavery was doomed, or that it had died at Fort Sumter; Douglass maintained that Americans should secure their own destiny rather than rely upon God to complete the work of abolition: "It is cowardly to shuffle our responsibilities upon the shoulders of Providence." Although he was suspicious of the providential methodology, Douglass was reluctant to give up the idea of a mission for the United States in history. Proposing that the war would culminate

⁵² See Chapter 6, note 66 and accompanying text.

⁵³ David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 6–10; Wilson Jeremiah Moses, "Frederick Douglass: Superstar and Public Intellectual," in Moses, *Creative Conflict in African-American Thought: Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 21–45, at 42.

⁵⁴ Douglass also delivered this lecture to the Emancipation League in Boston. John W. Blassingame, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates and Interviews*, 5 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979–92), 3: 489–508, at 508.

⁵⁵ "Danger to the Abolition Cause," *Douglass' Monthly* 4, no. 1 (June 1861): 466–67.

⁵⁶ "Colonization," *Douglass' Monthly* 5, no. 4 (September 1862): 705–6.

⁵⁷ "Our National Fast," *Douglass' Monthly* 4, no. 4 (October 1861): 531–32.

in “national regeneration,” he anchored his political program to the idea that America had a deeper purpose.

We have heard much in other days of manifest destiny. I don't go all the lengths to which such theories are pressed, but I do believe that it is the manifest destiny of this war to unify and reorganize the institutions of this country – and that herein is the secret of the strength, the fortitude, the persistent energy, in a word the sacred significance of this war.⁵⁸

The Civil War presented Douglass with an opportunity to perfect this apparently paradoxical idea: Americans should not rely on providential intervention, but they could reassure themselves of a progressive mission and even a “sacred significance.” After 1865 he continued to argue that America would inspire the world with a “perfect national illustration of the unity and dignity of the human family.” He also kept watch for those people who would deny human agency in the great drama of emancipation.⁵⁹ His wariness in this respect was surprisingly durable. As late as 1890, at an abolitionist reunion in Boston, Douglass rebuked an elderly white minister for suggesting that God, rather than the Republican Party and the abolitionists, had abolished slavery: “Now, the good Lord had a chance to abolish slavery a long time ago,” he joked, before praising Garrison, Phillips, Sumner, and the other “good men who are God in the flesh.”⁶⁰

Douglass's understanding of America's past and promise was tendentious. In his many reminiscences of Lincoln, he harnessed the president's reputation to his own vision of racial justice, encouraging audiences to imagine Radical Reconstruction as a natural continuation of Lincoln's own work.⁶¹ But even if he had discarded his belief in providentialism, Douglass was convinced that the United States would continue to expand its influence beyond its borders. This

⁵⁸ “The Mission of the War,” in *Douglass Papers*, 4: 3–24, at 3–4, 5, 21, 16.

⁵⁹ Douglass, “Lecture in the Boston Music Hall,” December 7, 1869, in *ibid.*, 4: 240–59, at 253.

⁶⁰ “Good Men are God in the Flesh,” in *ibid.*, 5: 432–36, at 434. Douglass allowed that there were “eternal forces ever in motion, carrying on the course of truth and justice in this world,” but the emphasis of his address was on the need to recognize human instrumentality: “The freedom of the negro was brought by means.”

⁶¹ David W. Blight, “Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass: A Relationship in Language, Politics, and Memory,” in Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 76–90. Blight's careful explication of Douglass's uses of Lincoln stands in contrast to many books and articles that simply quote Douglass to vouchsafe Lincoln's enlightened racial thinking. Douglass retained the ability, even late in life, to recall Lincoln's harsh words about colonization in the summer of 1862 and to link these to violence and prejudice toward blacks in the North during the Civil War. See, for instance, “The Negro Problem,” an address delivered at the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., October 21, 1890, in *Douglass Papers*, 5: 436–56, at 438. For an example of Douglass's mythologizing of Lincoln in the service of racial equality after Reconstruction, see “Abraham Lincoln, the Great Man of Our Century,” an address delivered at the Union League Club of Brooklyn, February 13, 1893, in *ibid.*, 5: 535–45. According to one newspaper, Douglass's studied use of Lincoln to condemn racial discrimination in the present “must have caused the cheeks of more than one of his Caucasian listeners to burn and tingle with shame.”

conviction was at the core of his opposition to black colonization. Douglass had long exhibited the fate of Native Americans to argue against any black removal from the nation. In 1869 he told the American Anti-Slavery Society that, even if a colony of angels was established on the borders of the United States, “it would be impossible to keep the peace between those angels and this progressive Anglo-Saxon nation.”⁶² But after the Civil War, he concluded not only that blacks should remain with white Americans, and forge that composite nationality that he declared to be the mission of the United States, but that the United States should expand and absorb other nations that were fated to penury or hostility on its margins – hence Douglass’s support for Ulysses Grant’s plan to annex Santo Domingo.⁶³ Between 1871 and 1873, as Grant tried to persuade the American people to accept annexation, Douglass traveled around the country promising that the United States would “redeem” Santo Domingo. He even alluded once more to manifest destiny, but suggested that this new form of territorial expansion would draw inspiration from “that nobler, better and more poetic side of our nature – that side which allies man to the Infinite, which in some sense leads him to view the broad world as his country and all mankind as his countrymen.” Territorial expansion was no longer to be associated with slavery, but instead with “freedom and progress.”⁶⁴

Frederick Douglass recognized the power of providential language, but his increasingly liberal religious convictions, and his cynicism toward pious deference and evasion, led him away from an overt providentialism even as he defined a progressive mission for the regenerated nation.⁶⁵ In his endorsement of expansion and the annexation of Santo Domingo, Douglass projected the promise of America beyond its breaking point, but he did so from the profound conviction that blacks had either to harness American imperialism or to be consumed by it. He also demonstrated an ability to dilute the religious basis of historical providentialism without sacrificing its political ambitions. As Douglass pointed back to Columbus’s first landing on Hispaniola – “the cradle of American beginnings” – and returned his audience to a time “long before old Plymouth Rock had yet a Christian tongue,” he defined an upward trajectory for America, and a redemptive purpose for the United States, without the explicit involvement of providence.⁶⁶ Douglass’s liberalized version of American mission was farsighted: in the twentieth century, American orators would refer confidently to a national mission or destiny but only rarely to providence. His vision of the United States lifting “demoralized” peoples out

⁶² “Address to the American Anti-Slavery Society,” May 11, 1869, in *Douglass Papers* 4: 199–213, at 207.

⁶³ Merline Pitre, “Frederick Douglass and the Annexation of Santo Domingo,” *Journal of Negro History* 62, no. 4 (1977): 390–400.

⁶⁴ “Santo Domingo,” in *Douglass Papers*, 5: 342–55, 604–5. Douglass delivered versions of this address in St. Louis, Chicago, Washington, Boston, Baltimore, and other cities.

⁶⁵ Waldo E. Martin Jr., *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 175–80.

⁶⁶ “Santo Domingo,” 345–47.

of “degradation” might also have appealed to the expansionists of the 1890s, though they could hardly have appreciated Douglass’s insistence that a composite American nationality was the key to redeeming both America and the world. Gilbert Haven and Frederick Douglass had braided racial equality into projections of America’s destiny, but they could not prevent this from unraveling under the pressures of discrimination and chauvinism in the years ahead.

The story of historical providentialism in the 1890s and beyond leads away from the unresolved social issues of emancipation and toward America’s engagement with the rest of the world. Perhaps the lengthy effort to understand God’s purposes for blacks and Indians in the United States was a laboratory for the application of providential rhetoric to foreign affairs. (Atticus Haygood, who denied any interest in black expatriation, concluded his study of *Our Brother in Black* by imagining that the “plans of Providence” would send African Americans to the “uncounted millions in their mother country.”)⁶⁷ But, in spite of the prolonged entanglement of providential thinking with the fate of nonwhites in America, the polished formulations of American mission that animated the rhetoric of William McKinley or Woodrow Wilson omitted America’s racial problems entirely. “I believe that men are emancipated in proportion as they lift themselves to the conception of providence and of divine destiny,” observed Wilson on the campaign trail in 1912. “Therefore I cannot be deprived of the hope that is in me – in the hope not only that concerns myself, but the confident hope that concerns the nation – that we are chosen and prominently chosen to show the way to the nations of the world how they shall walk in the paths of liberty.”⁶⁸ These were paths from which nonwhite Americans had been excluded at home, though the idea of an American mission – rooted in historical providentialism and its selective, progressive account of American history – could hardly help Wilson to recognize this discrepancy.

Conclusion: “Centennial Reflections”

After 1865 William Lloyd Garrison came to doubt his conviction that America had been regenerated by the Civil War. This realization came to him slowly and gave him no pleasure whatever. After his unsuccessful effort to dissolve the American Anti-Slavery Society in May 1865, and his plea for the abolitionists to “mingle with the mass” rather than to separate themselves from the mainstream of American society, Garrison spent some time basking in unfamiliar adulation. For a man who had spent much of his life fearing crowds, “the mass” must have

⁶⁷ Haygood, *Our Brother in Black*, 242. For an account of the ongoing appeal of colonization after 1865, in spite of the practical difficulties that impeded black removal, see Luker, 30–56.

⁶⁸ Woodrow Wilson, “A Campaign Address in Jersey City, New Jersey,” May 25, 1912, in Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 69 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966–94), 24: 434–44, at 443. Wilson confessed to the audience that “if I did not believe in Providence I would feel like a man going blindfolded through a haphazard world.”

seemed particularly beguiling in 1865. In the fall, after reviewing his shaky finances, Garrison determined to capitalize on his celebrity with a tour of the western states, in which he would lecture to paid audiences on “The Past, Present and Future of the Country.”⁶⁹ He met with a favorable response in Chicago and other cities, and though the halls were not always filled, he was pleased with his reception. In spite of the title of his talk, Garrison offered not an explicit historical providentialism but a series of anecdotes from his long fight against slavery. In discussing the present situation, he effectively endorsed the arguments of Douglass and Phillips and promised that the achievement of racial equality in America would “symbolize liberty for all the world.”⁷⁰

Garrison did not immediately appreciate the importance of black suffrage, though he had done so by 1866, and he wrote regularly for the *New York Independent* on the need for Radical Reconstruction.⁷¹ This initial oversight, along with his celebrity and his triumphant mood in 1865, persuaded some of his former colleagues that he believed the work of racial justice had been completed – hence his uneasy relationship with Wendell Phillips and with other abolitionists who judged that he had abandoned his post. Garrison issued the last number of the *Liberator* in December 1865; the following year, his friends began to organize a national collection to raise money for his retirement (an endeavor that was fiercely attacked by one of Wendell Phillips’s followers).⁷² In 1867 he traveled to England, where he was fêted by John Stuart Mill and hundreds of notables at a lavish breakfast held in his honor. Garrison, when called upon to speak, declared that Britain and America might now “lead the way gloriously to the world’s redemption,” a statement of rare flamboyance.⁷³ Already, though, Garrison had begun to doubt whether this easy adulation actually confirmed his belief that “the mass” was committed to Reconstruction. Having spent three decades promising divine wrath for the United States, he was not blinded by the racial jubilee that he briefly glimpsed in 1865. As early as April 1866, he identified the “remorseless prejudice” of whites toward blacks even after abolition, and he promised God’s “infinite contempt” and “retribution” upon the nation if this prejudice persisted.⁷⁴

Garrison wrote regularly for the *Independent* on the misdemeanors of Andrew Johnson and, in spite of the achievements of the Radical Republicans,

⁶⁹ For details of Garrison’s plan, see Walter F. Merrill, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, vol. 5: *Let the Oppressed Go Free, 1861–1867* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 307–9.

⁷⁰ “William Lloyd Garrison,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 17, 1865, 4.

⁷¹ “Misrepresentation or Misconception: A Letter from William Lloyd Garrison,” *Independent*, February 8, 1866, 1. Garrison defines “the full measure of complete citizenship” to include “the right to be represented and vote for representatives, as do the whites,” in his Brooklyn address, “Liberty Victorious,” 2.

⁷² “Meeting of the New England Anti-Slavery Convention,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, June 15, 1867, 1. See also *Independent*, May 16, 1867, 1.

⁷³ “Public Breakfast to Wm. Lloyd Garrison,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 27, 1867, 1.

⁷⁴ Garrison, “Pariah-ism and Slavery,” *Independent*, April 12, 1866, 1.

he was increasingly worried about the course of national reunion. Even the people of his home state of Massachusetts chose to remember the war in ways that troubled Garrison. In June 1869 he attended a "Peace Jubilee" in Boston that had been staged by a local impresario to celebrate both the end of the war and the arrival of Ulysses Grant in the White House.⁷⁵ The centerpiece of the Jubilee was an enormous temporary building, the Coliseum, which could hold forty thousand people. The dimensions of this celebration, as Garrison reported to readers of the *Independent*, were extraordinary: the choir and orchestra numbered more than ten thousand, and played to a crowd of nearly three times that size. Fifty thousand people crammed into the celebrations on their busiest day, and Ulysses Grant himself – who had famously declared that peace between North and South was the objective of his administration – paid a visit to the Coliseum. Although Garrison was awed by the spectacle, he was baffled by "the omission from the entire programme of all reference to that sublime act of emancipation which alone made it possible to crush the Rebellion and save the Republic, and to hold this very jubilee." Garrison wondered if this was intentional; forced to sit through a deafening rendition of "The Harp That Once Through Tara's Halls," he asked himself why the "mighty mass" that attended the Jubilee was not "filling the spacious edifice" with the sound of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."⁷⁶

During the 1870s Garrison continued to file dispatches on the failures of Reconstruction and the persistence of prejudice. He was particularly exercised by Grant's effort to annex Santo Domingo, and in an article on "American Swagger and 'Manifest Destiny'" he suggested that the nation was suffering from a shortage of "political rectitude" rather than "extent of territory." Garrison also made the obvious point that the treatment of blacks in the South hardly qualified the United States for a redemptive mission overseas: "Heaven knows that we are not yet so far delivered from our deep-rooted prejudices against the negro race as to make us care a straw for the mental, moral, or material condition of the Dominicans."⁷⁷ Unlike Charles Sumner, Garrison remained a supporter of Grant in spite of the president's lunge toward the Caribbean, and Garrison continued to believe that the Republican Party was the best hope

⁷⁵ "The 'Peace Jubilee' and President Grant in Boston," *Christian Advocate*, June 24, 1869, 197; "The Boston Jubilee," *New York Observer*, June 24, 1869, 198; and "Table Talk," *Putnam's Magazine* 4, no. 20 (August 1869): 258–60.

⁷⁶ Garrison, "The Late National Peace Jubilee Concert," *Independent*, July 8, 1869, 1. Garrison had famously broken down in tears at Fort Sumter in April 1865 when a regimental band played "John Brown's Body" during a service commemorating the end of the Civil War. For a similar complaint about the Boston Jubilee, which bemoaned the idea of "restoring" a peace that had always been hostile to blacks, see Marie A. Brown, "The Peace Jubilee," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, June 19, 1869, 1. Brown complained that, even though America had "received the divine commandments" and had been "baptized with her mission . . . to establish universal freedom," yet "she will drop her work at any time, at whatever risk, to suck a sugar-plum or fly a balloon, to pander her vanity, or to gratify her ambition."

⁷⁷ "American Swagger and 'Manifest Destiny,'" *Independent*, April 27, 1871, 1. See also "Naboth's Vineyard," *Independent*, December 22, 1870, 2.

for those who advanced the cause of racial justice. But the course of events, especially after 1874, cramped his sense of political possibility and drove him back toward his old position: the United States would be severely punished, perhaps even destroyed, unless white Americans could overcome their prejudices.⁷⁸

Garrison turned seventy in December 1875; the following month, his beloved wife Helen died of pneumonia. At the opening of America's centennial year, Grant's lame-duck administration was mired in corruption scandals, and the Republican Party was on the brink of abandoning Reconstruction entirely. Congress and Americans at large had determined to put aside the worries of the present and celebrate the centennial in grand style. In Philadelphia, an enormous exhibition was organized on 465 acres of Fairmount Park, bringing together manufacturers and artisans from across the country and around the world.⁷⁹ The festival was opened on May 10 by President Grant, accompanied somewhat incongruously by the last emperor of Brazil, Dom Pedro II. Richard Wagner had provided an orchestral march for the occasion, and hundreds of thousands of people thronged the streets of the city and the grounds of the exhibition.⁸⁰ On July 4, as the Liberty Bell chimed midnight, a torchlit procession in the streets of Philadelphia greeted the ringing in of the centennial.⁸¹ Later that morning, another enormous crowd gathered in Fairmount Park, and independence orators from Maine to Oregon discoursed on the glorious career of the United States.⁸² Not all of these orations were providential; many of the southern offerings were tinged with a regret or distemper that suggested that the reunion sentiments of Edward Pollard had not yet overwhelmed white southerners more generally. In Hamburg, South Carolina, two white farmers clashed with a company of black militiamen who were celebrating the day; the farmers' complaint about these unruly blacks led to a confrontation at the courthouse four days later and to the capture and lynching of five black men.⁸³

Back in Roxbury, Massachusetts, Garrison watched his frolicking neighbors on the Fourth but declined to join the celebrations. Instead, he withdrew to his study to compose an editorial for the *Independent*. Imagining the

⁷⁸ Note Garrison's letter to Theodore Weld, February 1, 1875: "All the signs of the times are portentous of evil. . . . Dreadful events are locked-up in the not far distant future. Still, 'the Lord reigns,' and the nation shall reap as it sows." Walter M. Merrill and Louis Ruchames, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, vol. 6: *To Rouse the Slumbering Land, 1868-1879* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 371.

⁷⁹ For an exhaustive contemporary account of the festival, see J. S. Ingram, *The Centennial Exposition, Described and Illustrated* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Bros., 1876). See also Linda P. Gross and Theresa R. Snyder, *Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial Exhibition* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2005).

⁸⁰ Ingram, 74-81.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 654-58.

⁸² More than fifty of these addresses, from across the country, were reprinted in Frederick Saunders, ed., *Our National Centennial Jubilee: Orations, Addresses and Poems Delivered on the Fourth of July, 1876, in the Several States of the Union* (New York: E. B. Treat, 1877).

⁸³ Foner, 570-72.

“extraordinary civic and military displays” from “one end of the country to the other,” he invited his readers to cut through the “spectacular exhibitions” and to resist the temptation “to burn incense to the memories of the famous dead.” Instead, they should look for substance amid all this celebration: “The residuum will indicate very little of solid reflection, disinterested patriotism, or inflexible adherence to the fundamental principles of justice and equal rights.” Garrison, unlike Gilbert Haven or Frederick Douglass, had never really flirted with the idea of a providential mission for America. Instead, he had insisted on judicial providentialism – on the idea that God would prosper or punish the United States on the basis of its adherence to justice and equal rights. As he listened to fireworks and imagined the encomia to the nation’s career that would accompany them, he offered his own “centennial reflections”:

It is not a gracious task to make this examination, and its performance cannot fail to give offense; nevertheless, our national career, from 1776 to the present Centennial period calls for deep humiliation before God, and penitent confession that we have been guilty of dissimulation, perfidy, and oppression on a frightful scale. Had we been true to the standard that we erected with such circumstance and solemnity, because of “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind” and “with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence,” how many thrones in the Old World would now be left standing? What throne has yet been shaken in consequence of our example?

He went on to provide a counterhistory of America’s first century, from the proslavery compromises of the Constitution and the expulsion of the Indians; through the vicious campaign against abolitionism and the aggression of the Mexican War; to the new racist consensus between North and South that was poised to overturn Reconstruction at the November election. The abolition of slavery had been forced upon Americans by circumstance, and they had failed to learn the moral lesson of equality from the “heavy visitation” of the Civil War. “The melancholy fact,” Garrison concluded, “is that the nation has never repented of its great transgression.” Could Americans treat July 4, 1876, as a national jubilee, with these facts in mind? “If we rejoice at all, let it be with contrite hearts that we have not been utterly consumed.”⁸⁴

Garrison received at least one angry letter about his “Centennial Reflections” – from his son, Wendell Phillips Garrison, who had made his career working in New York with E. L. Godkin on the new *Nation* magazine. Garrison must have nursed doubts about his son’s career choice. The *Nation*, after supporting the Democratic candidacy of newspaper editor Horace Greeley in 1872, had resolved to batter the Grant administration for its corruption even if this meant electing a president who would retreat from Reconstruction.⁸⁵ As he reproached

⁸⁴ Garrison, “Centennial Reflections,” *Independent*, July 6, 1876, 1–2.

⁸⁵ On the deterioration of Wendell’s relationship with his father during the 1870s, precipitated partly by the *Nation*’s drift away from Radical Reconstruction, see Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Growing Up Abolitionist: The Story of the Garrison Children* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 270–73.

his father for his incendiary editorial, Wendell insisted that the need to “redeem the country from the curse of political corruption” gave a poetic license to the historian and the patriot. Regardless of the blemishes in America’s past, an intrepid reform journalist should be able to wield Washington or Jefferson against the grubby politicians of the gilded age.⁸⁶ But Garrison was having none of it. “This nation has been the guiltiest of all the nations of the earth since its independence of Great Britain,” he replied to his son. The Founding Fathers had been held up for too long as “the noblest of patriots and the truest friends of liberty,” and in fact had been “time-servers and compromisers, [who] entailed upon their posterity as great a curse as could be inflicted upon any people.” He concluded his response with a (surely ineffectual) chiding: “I trust no child of mine will ever fail to recognize their exceeding blameworthiness, or consider a reference to it ill-timed when they are presented for the admiration of the world.”⁸⁷

Garrison was not completely immune to the patriotic mood that was so prevalent in 1876. In a letter to an old friend in August, in the midst of another jeremiad about the possibility of “further chastisement” from God for the “manifold transgressions” of the nation, Garrison let slip that he had spent several days exploring the “marvels of the Centennial Exposition” on a trip to Philadelphia. In fact, he’d roamed the massive site at Fairmount Park with such rapt curiosity that he had “brought back my old rheumatic affliction in my right knee,” which still caused him “acute pain” a week later.⁸⁸ His enthusiasm for the centennial passed away more quickly than the discomfort in his joints. On Thanksgiving Day, he went to Boston to hear a sermon by his old friend, the erstwhile abolitionist James Freeman Clarke, and felt sufficiently displeased to write to its author. Clarke’s text had been 1 Samuel 7:12: “Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.” Garrison did not much care for the connotations of this, or for Clarke’s suggestion that this would be “a highly appropriate inscription” for a public monument to mark the American centennial. Back in 1861, Clarke (like Wendell Phillips) had declared abolition a higher priority than national unity and had encouraged the South to secede.⁸⁹ Clarke seemed now to embrace the

⁸⁶ For a graphic illustration of Wendell’s point, see the series of centennial lectures on the “Destiny of the Republic” by John Cotton Smith, which were reprinted in the *New York Times* in the last months of 1876. “Some men begin to despair of the republic” on account of “political corruption of the most demoralizing character,” Smith lamented. “If such men would read the history of this nation aright, they would see that it was intrusted with a mission by the Almighty, and it only remained for them to discharge fully the duties incumbent upon them to carry the nation safely through.” “The Destiny of the Republic,” *New York Times*, December 25, 1876, 2.

⁸⁷ William Lloyd Garrison to Wendell Phillips Garrison, July 21, 1876, in Merrill and Ruchames, eds., 410–12.

⁸⁸ Garrison to Samuel May Jr., August 1, 1876, in *ibid.*, 413–15.

⁸⁹ James Freeman Clarke, *Secession, Concession, or Self-Possession: Which?* (Boston: Walker and Wise, 1861).

old canard that God had a special destiny for the United States. Garrison was not impressed.

I object to this phraseology because it seems to imply that the Lord has a deeper concern for American interests than he has for those of any other people outside of our territorial limits. The ancient Jews had the egotism and self-complacency to consider themselves “the chosen people of God” and fancied that they were the special objects of his regard as against the rest of mankind; but, instead of having been the better for this boast, the final result was their utter overthrow, and miserable dispersion in various parts of the earth, which continues to this day. It remains for the future to disclose whether this nation shall also have its signal downfall, or whether, recognizing in word and deed the whole human race as equally precious in the Divine sight, and humbling itself to the dust for its manifold transgressions in the past, it shall present to the world the sublime spectacle of a nation in which there are none to molest or make afraid, equal and exact justice is meted out to every man, liberty and peace reign universally, and righteousness shines in its constellated crown a star of the first magnitude. But, in view of our centennial career – stained as it is to the core with pollution and blood, with violence and oppression of the deepest dye, with the most shameless disregard of the grand “self-evident truths” we proclaimed to the world *ab initio* in our Declaration of Independence – it would but heighten our guilt and impiety for us to erect any monument having for its description, “Hitherto the Lord has helped us, and He will not desert *His people*, or cease to sustain *His heritage*.” It is not the time for us to make any such pretension, or to lay this “flattering unction” to our souls.

Garrison believed that, with the collapse of Reconstruction, the nation was on the verge of “another dark period in American history.”⁹⁰ His frustration with Clarke, and with the rhetoric of the centennial, stemmed from his suspicion of historical providentialism. Across his entire career, he had stressed the need for an “inflexible adherence” to abstract principles of morality and law. But he had encountered a seemingly endless procession of opponents who were willing to mold God to their own interpretation of American history. This could be done by abolitionists as easily as by the defenders of slavery but, as the debates over emancipation and the future of African Americans had demonstrated, the insistence on an upward trajectory for the United States tended toward the simple statement that what had happened in America was somehow part of the providential scheme. As southerners like Edward Pollard and Atticus Haygood assured northern audiences that both slavery *and* emancipation were providential, because each had been a divine strategy for uplifting blacks, the conservative potential of this argument about God and America was readily apparent.

Abraham Lincoln told Congress in December 1862 that “we cannot escape history.” As William Lloyd Garrison realized, this was not entirely true. The

⁹⁰ Garrison to James Freeman Clarke, December 2, 1876, in Merrill and Ruchames, eds., 428–37, at 428–29.

nation had come through the fires of the Civil War with a sense of vindication purchased at a terrible cost in human lives. The tendency to imagine Lincoln and emancipation as the providential instruments that had secured this victory masked the deep roots of racial prejudice that sustained and outlived American slavery. Historical providentialism made it easy – perhaps even necessary – to escape history, because it invited Americans to remember only those moments and ideas in their past that confirmed their self-image. This proved advantageous to the colonists of New England in the uncertain years that followed the English Civil War, and to the Patriots during the American Revolution who invented the United States and credited God as its author. But it blinded Americans to the complex realities that shaped the early republic and the world at large, even as it encouraged a skewed understanding of the nation's origins and its future.

Surely no country could endure a citizenry made up entirely of Garrisons, dashing every patriotic romance and logging the slightest misstep in the national career. Conversely, Garrison was not the only American to develop immunity to the idea of a special mission for the nation. Look up “providential” in Ambrose Bierce’s *Devil’s Dictionary* and this is what you find: “Unexpectedly and conspicuously beneficial to the person so describing it.”⁹¹ Consult the Harvard doctoral dissertation of W. E. B. Du Bois and you encounter a stinging attack on the idea that “slavery was a plague sent from God and fated to be eliminated in due time,” and a demand that Americans recognize “the cupidity and carelessness of our ancestors.”⁹² But Garrison’s lonely complaint in 1876 suggests that, a hundred years after the founding of the republic, the idea that God had a special destiny for the United States had become thoroughly entangled with the process of narrating American history. This had the virtue of strengthening ideas of America’s mission, especially beyond its own shores, but made it much harder for Americans to see their past clearly. Perhaps not everyone who indulged this sense of mission, and advanced the idea that God had raised up America for the good of humanity, intended to escape history. They may have done so anyway.

⁹¹ *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce*, 12 vols. (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1911), 7: 269–70.

⁹² W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896), 197–98.

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